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## Subjects, objects or participants? Dilemmas of psychological research with children

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## **SUBJECTS, OBJECTS OR PARTICIPANTS? DILEMMAS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN**

**Martin Woodhead and Dorothy Faulkner**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*As a novice researcher in the early 1970s one of us (Martin) was assigned the task of carrying-out psychological tests on 4-year-old children in a nursery school. The aim was to measure the impact of "cognitive style" on socially disadvantaged children's learning. The study was part of a wider programme of experimental intervention research to test (at that time) contested claims about the long term outcomes of preschool education (Woodhead 1976). The site of fieldwork was a nursery school on a new housing estate. The head teacher had allocated a small room where I could test the children undisturbed. In the days leading up to the research I familiarized myself with nursery routines and with the children who had been selected as subjects of the research - as well as observing their behaviour as they worked on jigsaw puzzles, scrambled over the climbing frame, and played in the home corner.*

*Finally the moment came to show one of my new 'friends' the attractive set of 'games' designed to test for cognitive style. I invited her into the room, shut the door, sat her down and took my place at the opposite side of the table. This first child carried out the tests alright, but she seemed uncomfortable throughout and eager to return to the main playroom. My next recruit was a boy, who refused point-blank, even to enter the room. A third seemed equally apprehensive. I can still recall my feelings of inadequacy, faced with the prospect of going back to the office with only one completed set of data sheets. I couldn't think of anything from the methodology textbooks to explain the children's reluctance to do the tests. Eventually I plucked up courage to admit my failure to the head teacher. She paused for a moment and then reassured*

*me in a motherly way: "Oh don't worry, it's probably because the children think of that as 'the naughty room'. You'd better use a different room". My research credibility was redeemed, although I've always wondered about the real or imagined fate that awaited children sent to the 'naughty room'.*

We start with this anecdote as a way of introducing some of the key issues for anyone working in psychological research with children:

- about the appropriateness of applying principles of experimental design and laboratory measurement as tools for understanding and shaping children's lives;
- about the constructions of childhood associated with various kinds of psychological enquiry, as these compare with other disciplinary approaches to research with children;
- about the importance of enquiring how children themselves construe the research context, the tasks set and the interactions initiated by the investigator;
- about power relationships between researcher and researched that are implicit within scientific procedures of psychological testing, systematic observation, controlled intervention and evaluation;
- about the ethical dilemmas raised by this kind of child research, especially research that involves experimental procedures and may involve a degree of deception about the researcher's purposes;
- more broadly, about the status of children who are the subject of a scientific discipline primarily concerned with the description and explanation of psychological and developmental processes through objective observation, experimentation and explanation.

Psychological theory and research related to children has grown into a major area of University research and teaching, since its establishment little more than a century ago. Developmental theories, especially, have been a major source of insight for improving child care and education (Schaffer 1990), and a significant influence on policy and professional training. The significance of the child development paradigm is highlighted in UK government's identification of 'knowledge about child and young person development' as one of the six areas of expertise that make up the 'common core of skills and knowledge' for the children's workforce, covering 'physical, intellectual, linguistic, social and emotional growth and development of babies, children and young people' (DfES, 2005).

At the same time, critical views have been expressed since the 1970s, about the ways developmental psychology constructs its subject 'the child', (Ingleby 1974; Henriques et al 1984) about the role of child study in regulating children's lives (Rose 1989), and about the ethics of social research with children (Alderson, 1995; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Alderson and Morrow, 2004). 'Deconstructing' and 'reconstructing' developmental psychology (Burman, 1994, Woodhead, 1999) has most often been linked to the reassertion of children as subjectivities, as meaning-makers, as social actors, and as rights bearing citizens (e.g. Bruner and Haste, 1987; Bradley, 1989; Morss, 1996; Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 1992; Woodhead, 2004).

Some of these critiques and reconceptualizations of the 'developing child' arose from within the discipline. Others have been part of the move towards more interdisciplinary 'childhood studies', building on the recognition that children have been 'muted voices' in much conventional social science research, and society (Hardman, 1973) and asserting children's agency as a central theme (James and Prout, 1990).

## **Re-valuing the child in 'Child Development' - a challenge and a caution**

Contemporary child researchers can now draw on a refreshingly diverse array of frameworks and methods (see Lewis et al., 2003; Fraser et al., 2003; and other chapters in this volume). Even so, psychological studies of development remain highly influential in research, in policy and in professional training. The scale of research, publishing, media and teaching activity is huge, with numerous professional associations, journals, textbooks and courses at all levels.

This chapter was first drafted in 1999, as a commentary on some major trends in psychological research, with particular attention to the way the child is positioned in theory and in research practices: as subject, as object or as participant. The status, role and rights of children was becoming a subject of debate in all areas of society, including research. *The Children Act, 1989* was a catalyst for policy change within UK, as was the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989* at an international level. In the intervening years, the momentum of child-focused research, official reports and legislation has intensified; for example, in UK through major reforms in the wake of the government's *Every Child Matters* initiative, and the *Children Act, 2004*, (Parton, 2005). Safeguarding children, early intervention and prevention have been major policy priorities, but an increasing emphasis on recognizing the child as the principal stakeholder in their own well being, with a right to express their views and feelings, and to be consulted on matters that affect them, is gradually becoming embedded in legal and social work practice. Internationally, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child identified the right to express views and feelings, and be heard (UNCRC, Article 12) as one of four general principles, along with the right to survival and development, the right to non-discrimination and the primacy of the best interests of the child (UN Committee, 2003).

Davie (1993) was amongst the first to draw attention to the implications of

these developments for professional psychology in a keynote lecture in 1991, presented to the Education Section of the British Psychological Society. Entitled "*Listen to the child: a time for change*", the paper argued that children's perspectives should be given due weight in all areas of psychological work, (Davie 1993; see also Davie and Galloway 1996, and Davie et al 1996). At first sight, appealing to psychologists to make sure they listen to children may seem a little puzzling. Surely, amongst all the professional groups who work with children, psychologists might be expected to be most experienced and skilled in 'listening to the child'. In one sense this is of course true, especially for those engaged in clinical, therapeutic and counseling work. And those engaged in academic research, which is our emphasis here, offer a very substantial body of expertise, founded on generations of painstaking work to refine methods of interviewing and observation, as well as any number of techniques for eliciting children's sense of self, moral awareness, understanding of the world, interpersonal sensitivities etc. Much of this research expertise is all about empathizing with children's experiences, understanding their beliefs and respecting their concerns.

But in another sense this research is not about 'listening to the child'. While research transcripts are often rich in this kind of material, they are generally analyzed and interpreted in terms of more abstract questions which, as a rule, reflect the beliefs and priorities of researchers, rather than children. 'Child Development' is a body of knowledge constructed for the most part by adults, for other adults to use in order to make sense of, regulate, and promote children's lives, growth and well-being. Most commonly this has meant interpreting children's, situation, behaviour, feelings and thoughts in terms of theories and hypotheses, for example about cognitive or memory processes, stages of relative competence, normality, deviation and pathology:

Most research directly on children is devoted to measuring them, using the model of animal research to measure their growth, disease

or behaviour. Such research can bring great benefits to children's health and education. Yet it is largely impersonal. If children's views are collected, this is usually to atomise and process them through the grid of adult designed research. (Alderson 1996: 40)

Put crudely, while 'listening carefully' has always been considered basic good practice in psychological research, alongside 'observing systematically' and 'recording accurately', these research values have for the most part been a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Child research projects have conventionally been framed in terms of any number of academic, policy or professional agendas, but rarely child agendas. Exceptions to the rule are increasing, but are mostly initiated by researchers in other areas of child research (e.g. Hill, 1997; Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Jones, 2004; Kellett et al 2004). It is still the case within psychological, child development studies that research questions and methods are designed and carried out by researchers, not by children (especially in the case of structured, laboratory procedures). The research product is 'data', which is usually interpreted in relation to adult discourses about children's development, albeit often framed in terms of protecting their welfare and promoting the quality of their care and education. In short, power relationships in the research process are traditionally weighted towards the researcher as the expert on children, and on how to study children, on what to study about children and about how to interpret what children say and do.

These practices are reflected in the way topics are framed, for example as about investigating: the formative significance of infancy for later psychological functioning; the cognitive processes of communication and language, learning and teaching, thinking and reasoning; the evidence for developmental stages in the processes of psychological change; individual differences in children's abilities, personality etc; the positive or negative impact of environmental influences (methods of parenting, teaching approaches, etc); and the potential impact of interventions (parent-training, preschool education etc). It is hard to imagine how developmental research



could be conducted in a radically different way without abandoning many of these overarching themes that define the discipline.

Before accepting the proposal that developmental psychology be consigned to the dustbin of history (James et al. 1998), it may be worthwhile looking more into the complexities underlying that simple appeal to 'listen to the child'. To begin with, it seems important to assert the obvious, that developmental research is not a singular enterprise. On the contrary, it encompasses a wide range of stances towards children and childhood, according to the questions being asked and the methods being employed. Moreover, doing research requires individual researchers to adopt multiple discourses of relationship with their subject. In the course of carrying out fieldwork, it is our experience that developmental researchers engage with children at a personal level in ways that are at least as warm, respectful and humane as might be observed for children's encounters with significant adults during their lives at home and at school. Yet when it comes to thinking about and writing about these same children, the scientific paradigm imposes different standards. Generations of aspiring developmental researchers have been exhorted to be objective, dispassionate, and adopt the technical rigors of hypothesis testing, experimental and control groups, and so on. Their subject – the child – is thereby transformed into a de-personalized object of systematic enquiry, their individuality evaporated into a set of measurable independent and dependent variables, and then condensed into general laws of behaviour. The particularities of the enterprise vary, as does the terminology, but the overall vision is little changed. For example, according to a new grand theory of development reported in the journal *Child Development* (2006): 'the infant is viewed as an integrated system consisting of multiple reciprocally coupled components...embedded within a specific context' (Spencer et al, 2006: ]

For many professional researchers, objectification, universalization and abstraction indicate the sophistication of a modern scientific discipline, rather than a signal heralding its imminent demise. In this respect,

psychological research with children might be seen as no different from medical research, where the capacity of the clinician to switch communication register between the bedside and seminar room is a highly valued skill. In the same vein, the complex roles and relationships between psychological researcher and researched require to be articulated, not assumed, far less dismissed. The critique of psychological research is, however, more far reaching than research methods and professional practices. It also links to the way childhood has been theorized, as a process of 'development':

Perhaps the most fundamental assumption concerning an overall picture of individual development is that of progress. Derived from or at least legitimated by biological sources, the notion that the individual gets better and better as time passes has been central to most developmental thinking. (Morss 1990:173)

Development as a positive, progressive process is one side of the story. The other side of the story is about the relative status of the researched child. As Verhellen (1997) puts it, within the developmental paradigm, children are in a state of 'not yet being'. They are a set of 'potentials', a 'project 'in the making, researched within an evaluative frame that is mainly interested in their position on the stage-like journey to mature, rational, responsible, autonomous, adult competence (James 1998; James et al 1998). The dominant child image is of a 'human becoming' rather than a 'human being', (Qvortrup 1994), illustrated by a book on early development published in 1991, co-edited by the first author under the title "*Becoming a Person*" (Woodhead et al 1991). With hindsight, this title clearly denigrates children's status as persons from the beginning of life, but at the time it appeared to reflect the growing research literature on the social processes through which young children construct skills and identity.

As we shall see, critics within and outside the psychological community have increasingly scrutinized research paradigms that were commonly applied

with children in the past, but are now considered ethically unacceptable, and/or methodologically unsound and/or theoretically unsatisfactory. To ensure this process is productive, account should be taken of the historical/cultural contexts in which psychological research has been carried out, the specific issues that it has most successfully informed and the significant role it has played in educational and social reform during the one hundred years or so of its existence. If psychological research and discourse may sometimes appear (by contemporary standards) to have been negligent of the rights, feelings and potential of young participants as social actors, such practices can be understood (but not condoned) as reflecting taken-for-granted assumptions about inter-generational relationships at the time. Research that may with hindsight appear insensitive to children's role and status was often at the forefront of social reform towards more enlightened, child-centred ways of treating children. The impact of Bowlby's studies of separation and attachment for the care of children in hospitals and nurseries during the 1940s and 1950s, or the impact of Piaget's studies of children's thinking on primary education practices in the 1960s and 1970s both illustrate the point. Contemporary psychologists have inherited a legacy of theoretical understanding and allied research procedures that are still practiced in modified form to this day. These continue to pose dilemmas to those who practice them, as we will elaborate below.

In the rest of this chapter we discuss children's role and status in two respects: within the research process; and within the theories of child development that inform that research. We are cautiously optimistic that psychologists are well able to reconstruct developmental research in ways that are both respectful to children and their cultural context as well as articulating and promoting their status as the principal stakeholder in child research. Indeed, we will argue that some recent insights from within developmental psychology have a positive role to play in elaborating the concepts that underpin the re-valuation of childhood, about children as 'social actors', about children as 'participants' and about the importance of listening to children's 'perspectives'.

## **CHILDREN IN RESEARCH**

The physical and biological sciences have strongly shaped the ways developmental research relates to its subject. One introductory textbook author writing in the early 1990s affirmed the dominant view:

Developmental psychology today is a truly objective science...Today a developmentalist determines the adequacy of a theory by deriving hypotheses and conducting research to see whether the theory can predict the observations he or she has made. There is no room for subjective bias in evaluating ideas; theories of human development are only as good as their ability to account for the important aspects of children's growth and development. (Shaffer 1993: 38)

While underlying scientific principles endure, as does their widespread application in educational and clinical work, the study of development has been transformed in recent years. Major shifts include increasingly sophisticated research technologies and an emphasis on more ecologically valid methods. Rigorous research ethics protocols now regulate all research involving human participants. At the same time, developmental psychologists are increasingly willing to recognise that research is a cultural practice, marked by specific patterns of adult-child relationship through which children's nature is constructed as much as it is revealed (see for example Bradley 1989; Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers 1992; Burman, 1994; Gergen et al 1996; Morss 1996 and Woodhead 1999a). Ingleby's account of '*The Psychology of Child Psychology*' (Ingleby 1974), along with Kessen's essay on the '*American Child and Other Cultural Inventions*' stand as landmarks in this respect. Kessen challenged 1970s orthodoxy thus:

Most expert students of children continue to assert the truth of the positivistic dream - that we have not yet found the underlying structural simplicities that will reveal the child entire, that we have

not yet cut nature at the joints - but it may be wise for us developmental psychologists to peer into the abyss of the positivistic nightmare - that the child is essentially and eternally a cultural invention and that the variety of the child's definition is not the removable error of an incomplete science. (Kessen 1979: 815)

Accepting the scale, eclecticism and changing character of research activity in developmental psychology, our aim in this section is to highlight some of the ways psychologists have engaged with their subject, as revealed through a selection of popular research methodologies.

### **Closely observed children**

The origins of systematic developmental research are most often traced to Charles Darwin, who famously compiled a day-to-day record of the behaviour of his eldest son (see Woodhead 2003). The biological-evolutionary orientation of observational work was most strongly reinforced by ethology, with its emphasis on meticulous recording of animal behaviours, often using complex coding systems (Tinbergen 1951; Blurton Jones 1972). And more general principles of developmental research – identifying age-linked, universal features of growth, behaviour and psychological functioning through rigorous scientific enquiry – remain deeply embedded in the developmental paradigm.

For example, the 1970s saw a burgeoning of interest in the role and function of play in children's development. Observational methodologies predominated, many originating from the comparative, evolutionary, and ethological sciences. In one of the most influential collections of papers on play from the 1970s ( Bruner, Jolley and Sylva, 1976) the sections headed '*Play and the world of objects and tools*' and '*Play and the social world*' contained one and a half as many papers on play in apes and other sub-human primates as papers on play in children. The underlying assumption was that methods appropriate to studying chimpanzees, stump-tail monkeys

and Japanese macaques in the wild, and the experimental techniques used on these animals in the laboratory, were also appropriate to the study and interpretation of play behaviour in children.

For the observational researcher working within these traditions, the less subjects are aware of being studied the better. In numerous classic studies, the observer maybe be found backed-up against the corner of the classroom or playground, trying to ignore children's invitations to join in the game, and – at worst - kidding themselves they can appear like the metaphoric ‘fly-on the wall’. Increasingly the video camera has displaced the observation checklist, as David Shaffer noted in his introductory child development textbook:

Observers must try to minimize the influence they are likely to have on the behaviour of their subjects...Videotaping is particularly effective at minimizing the influence of an observer if the taping is done from a concealed location...If videotaping is not feasible, observers can minimize their influence by mingling with the children in their natural habitats before the actual conduct of the study. In this way, children become accustomed to the observers' presence and therefore are less likely to "perform" for them or alter their behaviour in any significant way. (Shaffer 1993:19)

Another influence on the development of observational methodologies came from ecological studies, such as those of Barker and Wright (1951), who studied children in communities throughout post war USA, including one American 7 year-old tracked in every context and interaction from the moment he woke up to the moment he went to sleep.

While these studies emphasized the importance of observing natural behaviour, the influence of the physical sciences encouraged psychologists to consider the potential of collecting observational data under more controlled conditions. Treating ‘the child’ as an unproblematic unit of

observation, experimentation and analysis was rarely questioned, as Greene noted:

The object of knowledge for mainstream child psychologists of the twentieth century has been 'the child'. This objectification of children has been the inevitable consequence of the emulation of the natural sciences and the associated quest for universal laws..... Since for most of this century, mainstream child psychology conceptualized the child in much the same way as a chemist conceptualizes an interesting compound, it made absolute sense for the psychologist to take the child into a laboratory for closer inspection and testing. (Greene 1998: 257-258)

### **The test-tube child**

Principles of close observation combined with systematic experimentation enabled hypotheses to be tested about children's psychological functioning. Objectification was commonplace as in the following textbook author's advice about how to 'find out what children are like':

There are many ways to test hypotheses. Researchers can find out what children are like by observing them in natural settings, or by experimenting with them in a laboratory...Unlike naturalistic observation, an experiment tests a hypothesis in a controlled situation, that is a situation in which the relevant variables are limited and therefore can be manipulated by the experimenter. Typically the experimenter exposes a group of children to the particular variable that is under investigation (for instance a new teaching method, or a particular behaviour on the part of the caregiver, or a novel stimulus of some kind) and then evaluates how they react. (Berger 1991:22)

Dr Arnold Gessell was one of the pioneers of laboratory-based child study.

Working at Yale during the 1920s and 1930s, his meticulous observations guided generations of parents and professionals about the 'normal' milestones of physical, social, and intellectual development. A famous photograph of Gessell at work shows a giant 'test-tube' dome, within which the solitary infant sits in a cot, illuminated by spotlights and viewed by observers and camera-man through glazed panels. Gessell stands alongside the cot, (attired in white lab. coat), apparently testing the baby's reaction to a new object:

It is surely something quite remarkable that this small creature should have become the focus of this complex apparatus. The child is here caught-up within a complicated arrangement that will transform it into a visible, observable and analysable object, within a particular rational scientific discourse...It is these traces or inscriptions that have been accumulated, combined, correlated, graded, and consolidated into the object of developmental psychology. (Rose 1989: 143-4)

Gessell's continuing legacy is evident in the laboratories and observation rooms that are considered essential University research facilities, with ubiquitous one-way screen and ever more sophisticated computer-linked video recording equipment. Our own department is no exception.

### **Objects, subjects or participants?**

The objectified status of the child in research was clearly signaled in traditional scientific discourse, through being identified as experimental 'subjects'. The same applied to research with adults. But by 1991, guidelines issued by the *British Psychological Society* (BPS) signalled a policy shift, in favour of referring to 'participants':

...psychologists owe a debt to those who agree to take part in their studies...people who give up their time should be able to expect to be



treated with the highest standards of consideration and respect”  
(BPS Code of Ethical Principles, 1991: 5)

The code of 1991 related to research with all human participants, covering issues of informed consent, avoidance of deception and harm, confidentiality, and debriefing. It is notable that very little of the code related specifically to psychological research with children, whereas four pages were given over to ethics of animal research. The BPS has progressively elaborated ethical guidelines, most recently through a revised 'Code of Ethics and Conduct' (2006) and detailed guidance is also available on specific topics via the BPS website, ([www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)). In the USA, the 'Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct' issued by the *American Psychological Association* (APA, 2002) is augmented by a set of 'Ethical Standards for Research with Children' issued by the *American Society for Research in Child Development* (SRCD), ([www.srcd.org/ethicalstandards](http://www.srcd.org/ethicalstandards) ). These emphasize that children's rights have priority over the interests of the investigator and stress the importance of informing children about features of the research that might affect their willingness to participate. They also stress that procedures that may harm children physically or psychologically are unacceptable, (see also Stanley and Sieber 1992). These trends are of course one reflection of the demand for strong standards of ethical conduct and ethical scrutiny, affecting all areas of research, and signalled for example by the emergence of a specialist journal 'Research Ethics Review'.

Increasing sensitivity to ethical issues is also mirrored in the advice given by authors of child development textbooks. For example, in his 1996 textbook, Rudolf Schaffer emphasized the ethical unacceptability of experiments that were once standard items on undergraduate reading lists. For example, so-called 'resistance to temptation' experiments were still being reported in the prestigious journal 'Child Development' in the early 1970s. In these laboratory based studies, children were tantalized with a toy they were told they were not allowed to touch and observed to see if temptation got the

better of them. In some extreme examples, they were then punished with a loud noise or some other unpleasant experience. Such research is now considered indefensible on at least two counts. Far from being asked to give their consent, children were deceived and spied on by the investigators; secondly the procedure was at best confusing, and at worst distressing. Ironically, researchers carried out such studies in order to measure children's capacities for moral behaviour!

### **A strange situation**

Despite these signs of progress, we believe ethical dilemmas are still insufficiently acknowledged in relation to some procedures that are still routinely used in contemporary research. To conclude this section we offer just one example, known as the Strange Situation. Originating from Bowlby's theory about emotional attachments in young children, and the impacts of early deprivations, and developed by Ainsworth et al (1978), the Strange Situation procedure has become a key tool in infancy research, in clinical studies, and in cross-cultural comparisons (e.g. van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988). One of its most controversial uses has been as an indicator of the impact of day care on young children (Belsky 1988; Clarke-Stewart 1989).

Typically, the researcher or clinician invites a parent or other primary caregiver to bring the young child into a laboratory playroom where their behaviour can be observed/video-recorded. In practice, in most studies this means the mother. The procedure involves several episodes. Initially mother sits with her infant, then a stranger enters and tries to engage with the child. At a signal the mother leaves the room, and the stranger tries to comfort the child. The child's reaction to being alone with the stranger is observed, as well as the reaction to the mother's return as she attempts to comfort the child. Several more episodes of separation and reunion follow, including the child being left entirely on their own for a short time (Ainsworth et al 1978). At each stage the infant's behaviour, level of distress

and reaction to mother as well as stranger is observed through a one-way screen and subsequently classified in terms of three (and increasingly four) categories: 'secure', 'anxious/avoidant', 'anxious/ambivalent', 'disorganized'. (For an overview see Oates, 2005).

The procedure is highly instructive about the relative status of adults versus children in research procedures – especially those involving very young, pre-verbal children. One issue concerns the ethics of placing children in a strange room, leaving them with a stranger, as well as entirely alone, whilst dispassionately measuring the level of their distress in terms of crying, sobbing and other expressions of panic. It is arguable - from the child's point of view - the procedure involves deception, withdrawal of consent, and harm. Deception is involved because the infant has no way of knowing they are not at serious risk of abandonment, and they are taking part in a research procedure. Withdrawal of consent is clearly signalled by the infant's distress during the earliest episodes of separation. Yet the baby's wishes are overridden (albeit very briefly) in the interests of completing the procedure. Thirdly, the procedure involves inflicting pain, in that children are intentionally placed in a situation that it is anticipated will cause them distress. Despite these concerns, this 'minimal risk' procedure is defended on the grounds that the parent has given consent, and is free to terminate the procedure at any stage. Moreover, it is argued that the stress involved is very brief, is quickly followed by comforting, and is no different from the kinds of brief separation experiences infants often have to cope with during the normal round of daily life. (For a discussion of the developmental dimensions of so-called 'minimal risk situations' see Thompson, 1992). The child might not agree with this analysis during that moment of separation distress where the presence of a stranger offers little comfort or consolation.

To highlight this point, we ask students to imagine they are asked to conduct the ethical review of a proposal for a variant on the Strange Situation paradigm, this time where the experimenter is mainly interested in measuring parents' rather than children's emotional attachments. The

procedure would involve enlisting children's cooperation in triggering a brief episode of separation distress in their parent. For example, during a school outing to the zoo, children would be encouraged to lead their parent around the zoo, admiring the lions and tigers, snakes and gorillas until - at a predetermined signal -the child would slip away into the crowd and out of sight of their parent. The researchers would be interested to observe evidence of parental distress on 'losing' their child and their reactions to the child's equally sudden reappearance. They would also be interested in the impact of a stranger offering comfort, and how long it took for the parent to compose themselves on reunion with their child.

The separation anxiety experienced by a parent faced with experimentally manipulated separation from their child might be expected to engage very powerful adult emotions, just as it does for an infant who is experimentally separated from their parent. But cultural attitudes to experimental interventions involving children versus adults are very different. Whereas inflicting distress in young children is justified because the distress is minor, commonplace, and carried out with parental consent, a contrived procedure that intentionally causes distress to their parent would be considered highly unethical.

To highlight the issues further, it is also instructive to ask how social attitudes towards experimentally induced distress might shift according to the age of the participant. The Strange Situation typically involves very young participants, under two years of age, who have little power to influence what happens to them. Would the procedure be equally acceptable if the child were three or four or five years old, able to articulate their distress in words, or try to run after their parent and escape the unwelcome attention of a strange person in a strange setting?

So far we have focused on the ethical dilemmas associated with the Strange Situation. A second concern relates to the ecological validity of this approach to researching children's emotional lives. A human emotional reaction

cannot be measured as if it were a chemical reaction. Unlike the chemist's raw materials, even very young children try to make sense of the 'strange-situation' in relation to their experiences of separations and reunions and the cultural meanings that attach to those experiences. For example, if day-care children show a different reaction to the procedure compared with home-reared children, does that show they are pathologically insecure, or that they have known very different experiences of separations and reunions during their daily lives? If they react in an identical way to home-reared children, can we assume they are experiencing the situation in an identical way (Clarke-Stewart 1989)?

Bronfenbrenner (1979) famously described many laboratory experiments involving children as studies of 'the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time' (p.19). His challenge to laboratory procedures has been widely heeded and there is much greater emphasis in contemporary developmental research on carrying-out research in real life settings, and, where experimental procedures are used, in asking what sense children make of the situation, the researcher's behaviour, instructions or question. Some examples of shifts in research paradigm will be explored the next section, as we turn to questions about the underlying images of children's status, capacities and competencies that shape research into their development. It is one thing for children to be recognized as participants in research. But how far are they recognized as participants in their own development?

### **Children in Development**

Undergraduate psychology students are perennially asked to, 'Compare and contrast two major theories about children's learning- Behaviourism versus Constructivism. In this section we take a look at these major theories of development and learning and consider the image that each portrays of children's activity, competence and status in the processes involved in learning, thinking and reasoning. The contrast between the two theories

could hardly be greater - in terms of ways of researching as well as ways of conceptualising children's developing abilities.

### *The managed child*

In their introduction to Behaviourism, textbook authors are fond of citing an experiment by the American pioneer of this approach, J.B. Watson. In order to demonstrate that children's fears of animals are not innate, but shaped by the environment, Watson and Rayner (1920) showed a 9 month-old child a series of toy animals. At first the child was happy to play with them. Then in the second stage of the procedure, the investigators hit a steel bar above the baby's head every time he reached for the rabbit. The noise was so loud it made the baby cry. By the time the procedure had been repeated several times, the sight of the rabbit was sufficient to induce fear in the baby. Moreover the baby's fear became generalized to other furry objects. In the language of behaviourism, the experimenters had induced a 'conditioned response' in their subject. Regrettably, they did not report any steps to reverse the procedure, and decondition the fears induced in their hapless young subject.

This way of treating children in research has long been condemned as ethically untenable. Yet the behaviourist legacy is still reflected in some areas of applied research, especially in contexts where modifying unacceptable behaviour is the psychologists' explicit goal. Skinner's influential experimental work with rats and pigeons was carried out mainly in the 1960s, and informed his view of a utopia where children are cared for by specialists in operant conditioning. Like so many celebrated developmental psychologists, Skinner saw his own offspring as an opportunity to test his theories. In one of his papers, entitled 'Baby in a box' Skinner describes how he designed '...an inexpensive apparatus in which our baby daughter has now been living for eleven months...' Having extolled the virtues of this labour-saving, hygienic, air-conditioned, sound-regulated device, Skinner goes on to discuss how

‘...a more interesting possibility is that her routine may be changed to suit our convenience. A good example of this occurred when we dropped her schedule from four to three meals per day. The baby began to wake up in the morning about an hour before we wanted to feed her. This annoying habit, once established, may persist for months. However by slightly raising the temperature during the night we were able to postpone her demand for breakfast’ (extracts from Skinner 1972: 567-571)

The basic principles of operant-conditioning proposed by Skinner, are still influential in some branches of clinical work and education. For example Forehand and McMahon (1981) pioneered the so-called ‘parent-child game’ to help parents regulate the behaviour of severely disruptive 3-8 year olds. Parents are taught to offer positive reinforcement to acceptable behaviour, give clear commands and operate a ‘time-out’ system for unacceptable behaviour. It is claimed that implementing clear rules and positive rewards combined with increased positive parental interactions with children in ways that enhance the quality of their relationship, results in more positive parental perceptions of parents towards children and an enhanced probability that parents will be able to ‘tune in’ to and ‘listen to’ their children (Jenner 1992).

Behavioural approaches to working with children are also reflected in major textbooks. For example, Durkin (1995) cites the work of Aronfreed (1968):

Punishment, according to Aronfreed, results in conditional anxiety becoming associated with the behavioural and cognitive precursors of a particular act... This promotes alternatives courses of action, including preference for non-punished behaviour and suppression of any inclination towards the punished act. Aronfreed [...] provides an excellent review of the effects of punishment upon rats, children, and other behaviorally challenging creatures. (Durkin, 1995, p 468)

We can only presume that the final phrase was intentionally provocative! Fortunately, more recent approaches to 'behaviorally challenging creatures' emphasize that it is just as necessary for parents to modify their behaviour and parenting practices as it is for them to attempt to manage their children's behaviour (e.g. Cavell, 2000).

### *The developing child*

Constructivist approaches offer a very different image of children's development, and very different ways of carrying-out research with children. Jean Piaget's theories are the most influential example of this paradigm. For most of his life, Piaget's principle goal was the elaboration of an epistemological theory rather than a theory that explained how children came to think and reason like adults. He is regarded as a developmental psychologist, however, because he held that it was necessary to trace the origins of mature logical, mathematical, scientific and moral thinking from infancy through to adolescence and beyond in order to answer questions about the nature of knowledge. This inspired a life-long research effort directed towards discovering and explaining changes in children's thinking from infancy onwards.

Piaget did not ascribe to the nativist view that knowledge is innate, nor did he accept the environmentalist position that children develop more mature ways of thinking by virtue of direct instruction and knowledge transmission. Instead he claimed that the human intellect is constructed through individual children's actions on the environment that lead them to discover certain logical truths about the properties of objects and the physical world. To test this claim Piaget questioned children closely about their explanations of and solutions to a series of carefully constructed scientific and logical problems. These experimental tasks were for decades considered the litmus test for assessing the maturity of children's reasoning. He was also a keen observer of children's play and games. By asking how they understood the



difference between pretence and reality and by taking part in their games Piaget was able to give an account of how children's understanding of social reality developed and changed over time.

Piagetian studies have been a major focus of the critiques of the developmental paradigm mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. A central plank of the argument is that developmentalism inevitably serves to diminish the status of the immature child when measured against adult standards of thinking and reasoning. What such critiques frequently fail fully to acknowledge however, is that Piaget had a deep respect for children. He listened to them closely and did not belittle their explanations as examples of inferior (non-adult) ways of thinking. In '*The Moral Judgement of the Child*', he states that:

It is of paramount importance [...] to play your part in a simple spirit and to let the child feel a certain superiority at the game [...] In this way the child is put at ease, and the information he gives as to how he plays is all the more conclusive. [...] The interrogatory, moreover, requires extremely delicate handling; suggestion is always ready to occur, and the danger of romancing is ever present. It goes without saying that the main thing is simply to grasp the child's mental orientation. (Piaget, 1932/75: 14 - 16)

Piaget's use of the 'clinical' or 'interrogatory' interview as a research method with its emphasis on encouraging children to talk freely, thus allowing their thinking to unfold and reveal itself to an attentive researcher, was highly innovatory at the time. As a young clinical psychologist, Piaget worked in the Binet laboratory in Paris, assisting in the standardization of intelligence tests. In later life, however, Piaget became much less interested in measuring children's relative competence and much more interested in what the mistakes they made revealed about their mental processes. Instead of dismissing children's words and deeds as due to ignorance, Piaget's goal was to encourage greater respect for young children's ways of thinking and

behaving.

Piagetian approaches to studying child development were dominant in Europe and to a lesser extent USA during 1960s and 1970s. One of the virtues of the paradigm was in encouraging teachers and parents (as well as researchers) to become more child-centred. But developmental research does not end with Piaget. His theory concerning the stage-like nature of the development of children's thinking and his explanations concerning the biological, or adaptive nature of the mechanisms responsible for this development have been subject to sustained re-examination. In the late 1960s, questions also began to be raised about the validity of the classic "litmus paper" tasks and their correct interpretation.

### **Making sense to children**

During the 1970s a research team led by Margaret Donaldson carried out a major reappraisal of the classic studies on which Piaget constructed his theories. She argued that Piaget's experimental context and tasks were so out of the ordinary compared to children's normal, everyday experience that they found them difficult to relate to and understand. She also argued that the design of the tasks made it impossible for young children to reveal their true competencies. The tasks made little 'human sense' to children. Donaldson and her colleagues devised several ingenious modifications of Piaget's original experimental tasks in ways that made them much more meaningful (Donaldson, 1978). They showed that under these more favourable circumstances, young children's reasoning was demonstrably more sophisticated than Piaget claimed.

Take, for example, one of Piaget's classic tasks designed to see whether children of different ages understand the principle that two numerically identical sets of objects will always be equal provided that nothing is added to, or taken away from one or other of the sets. Piaget assessed children's knowledge of this principle by carrying out a series of transformations on

two rows of counters which were initially arranged in one-to-one correspondence. He would then make one row appear longer or shorter than the other row, and ask ' Now is this row the same as that row'? Of course, perceptually, it isn't and under these circumstances young children typically respond that the second row is not the same as the first row. Piaget argued that children make progress with this particular concept when they recognise that they should ignore the perceptual evidence and only consider the logical evidence, something they are not capable of doing before the age of about seven. In Donaldson and McGarrigle's version of the task, children see naughty teddy accidentally rearrange the counters. Under these 'accidental' circumstances young children no longer argue that the two rows are not equivalent, (Donaldson, 1978).

Experiments where naughty teddies appeared to run riot amongst the testing materials, where children were asked where would be the best place to hide from a policeman, or where they were asked to help a toy panda to learn how to speak grammatically helped developmental psychologists recognize that children's true competencies are only revealed in situations which make sense to them. Comparing Piaget's original experiments with more child-friendly versions revealed that Piaget's experiments made situational demands on children's perception, verbal comprehension, memory and social understanding which served to mask the very reasoning processes they were designed to reveal. More importantly it came to be recognized by Donaldson and others (e.g. Bryant, 1974, Harris, 1983 ) that what appears to be 'faulty' , immature reasoning actually indicates children's ingenious attempts to create sensible meanings for what are, to them, nonsensical situations and contexts.

By taking the children's perspectives into consideration, Donaldson and her followers demonstrated that carefully crafted experiments can offer important insights about young children's capacities. Nevertheless, the experimental approach still relied on the isolation and control of variables that are not of immediate interest to the researcher concerned. As a result

important aspects of children's thinking such as imagination and pretence may be marginalized or ignored. In her recent book, *Real Kids: Creating Meaning in Everyday Life*, the American developmental psychologist, Susan Engel argues that observational studies of children in more natural contexts reveals that just like adults, children have complex inner lives and that their thinking is multifaceted. It is not always governed by logic and reason, contrary to what Piagetian approaches would have us believe.

It may be that because we are scientists, we tend to assume that that's what children are trying to be too, able to think about a certain problem and put everything else (personal lives, immediate visceral reactions and fantasies) aside. In trying to isolate their more scientific or rational thinking from other aspects of their experience, we may get a distorted view of the phenomenon. [...] The goal of more descriptive, naturalistic research is not simply to test the relative influence of a given variable on a specific outcome or behaviour, but more importantly to develop well articulated descriptions of the processes children use when encountering the world. (Engel, 2005: 41-42)

### **Children as social actors in cultural contexts**

The developing child's capacities for thinking and reasoning have been a major field for psychological investigation for more than 50 years. During much of this period Piagetian approaches dominated developmental psychology. The research emphasis was on investigations of how the child actively constructed knowledge through individual action and exploration. Since the 1970's, however, an alternative theoretical paradigm began to compete with the view of the child as a 'lone actor' or 'miniature scientist' (Cannella and Viruru 2004 cited in Smidt, 2006: 26). Psychologists began to articulate the extent to which children are social communicators and meaning makers from the beginning of life, trying to make sense of their social world, in the various cultural contexts they inhabit (Bruner and Haste, 1987). This new socio-cultural paradigm was

shaped by the insights of L.S. Vygotsky. Vygotsky's research on the nature of human cognition was carried out in the 1920s and 30s during a time of great social and political change in the then Soviet Union. Like his contemporary Piaget, he used experimental methods to study children's mental processes. Importantly, however, Vygotsky was a former teacher and many of his investigations were carried out in applied educational contexts. This led him to propose that knowledge is socially constructed between people; children develop sophisticated cognitive competencies through interaction with adults who are available as teachers or models to guide the child and help her make sense of her experience. This view marked a break from conventional cognitive theories of development, as Jerome Bruner explained: 'The child does not enter the life of his or her group as a private and autistic sport of primary processes, but rather as a participant in a larger public process in which public meanings are negotiated' (1990:13).

The socio-cultural paradigm inspired by Vygotsky's writing has been enthusiastically embraced by leading developmental psychologists such as Bruner (1990), Cole (1996), Dunn, (1988) and Rogoff, (1990, 2003) who have spearheaded major research programmes comparing the contribution of family and peer relationships and schooling to children's development. Central to this activity is the view that children are social actors in the cultural contexts or 'developmental niches' (Super and Harkness 1986) that constitute their particular worlds. We will offer a few contrasting examples of this research and newer methodological approaches that have, in Engel's words, attempted to 'develop well articulated descriptions of the processes children use when encountering the world' (Engel 2005: 42).

### **Active members of family worlds**

Our first example is concerned with the way preschool children achieve social understanding in family contexts. Judy Dunn carried out a series of studies drawing attention to children negotiating disputes, teasing and joking with adults and siblings, and sharing in conversations about social

and moral issues from a very early age. She argued that:

Children are motivated to understand the social rules and relationships of their cultural world because they need to get things done in their family relationships. What we see...is the child's increasing subtlety as a member of a cultural world - a subtlety achieved in part because of the pressure of the individual's needs and relationships within that world. (Dunn 1988:189)

Much of Dunn's research has been based on detailed observational studies in family contexts, in sharp contrast to a very different paradigm for studying children's capacities for social understanding that has dominated the attention of many developmental psychologists in recent years. So-called 'theory of mind' research is centered mainly on Piagetian-style clinical interviews with children. In classic 'false-belief' studies a story about two characters with different beliefs about the existing state of their world is presented to children using dolls as props. The story is designed to reveal the age at which children are capable of seeing a situation from another's point of view (Wimmer and Perner 1983). Young children appear much less competent as social actors when they are asked to apply their skills in this experimental setting than when observed in everyday life. Dunn makes the discrepancy explicit thus:

If preschool children are so limited in their ability to understand others, how do they manage to function effectively in the complex world of the family? Is it possible that there are differences between children's understanding of others ...in their intimate emotional family world, on the one hand, and their ability to reflect on and talk about the minds and actions of the hypothetical others that are the focus of most experimental studies, on the other hand?(Dunn 1998: 102)

## **Guided participants**

A second example offers powerful evidence on the way children's emerging competencies are structured, supported and amplified within supportive relationships. Based on an extensive, naturalistic observation of family communities in several cultural contexts, Rogoff (1990, 1993) elaborated a model of 'guided participation'. Instead of being about how children become competent to participate, it is about how they grow in competence *through* participation. Emphasizing that learning is primarily a social not an individual process, Rogoff built on another key concept in socio-cultural work, 'intersubjectivity', (Trevarthen 1998). This concept emphasizes the shared history, communicative strategies and purposes in a learning relationship that facilitate joint focus and effective collaboration. Laboratory studies of how children learn are often based on children working alone on a new task or skill. In everyday life, such complete novelty is rare. Rogoff argues that when teachers and learners encounter a new situation one of the first things they try to do is to make sense of it in terms of their past experiences. Teachers play a vital bridging role for children which:

Involves assisting children in understanding how to act in new situations by provision of emotional cues regarding the nature of the situation, non-verbal models of how to behave, verbal and non-verbal interpretations of behaviour and events, and verbal labels to classify objects and events. (Rogoff 1990)

Over the past 20 years or so, Rogoff's work with children and families in cultural contexts as diverse as India, Turkey, Guatemala and the USA has highlighted the way caregivers structure children's environment and interactions according to perceived goals for children's development and expectations about children's participation in community activities. In a seminal book entitled '*Cultural Nature of Human Development*', Rogoff proposes that development should be regarded as 'transformation of participation in sociocultural activity'. This view does not restrict

development to children. Rogoff argues that children and adults jointly engage in a process of changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities. The process of development is transformative both for individuals and for their cultural communities because 'as people develop through their shared use of cultural tools and practices they simultaneously contribute to the transformation of cultural tools, practices and institutions' (Rogoff 2003:52). It is unlikely that she would have arrived at this sophisticated view of development had she confined herself to studies of children and their caregivers in tightly controlled experimentally contrived settings that attempt to control for inconvenient factors such as cultural variability.

### **Collaborative learners**

Our next example is drawn from studies of children's collaborative learning in educational contexts. As outlined earlier, while Piaget offered an image of the child as a 'lone scientist' who constructed new knowledge through individual action, Vygotsky provided us with an image of the 'collaborative child' *socially* constructing knowledge through talk and collaborative activity. This theory has been incorporated into the pedagogy of British classrooms (e.g. Kutnick, Blatchford and Baines 2005; Light and Littleton 1999), along with the neo-Piagetian notion that engaging in socio-cognitive conflict leads to significant cognitive gain, (e.g. Mercer 1996; Howe, McWilliam and Cross 2005). In other words, children will make more intellectual progress when their own thoughts and ideas are challenged by children holding alternative, contradictory or opposing ideas.

The majority of early studies on collaborative learning followed a conventional experimental design, assigning children to pairs and groups on the basis of gender, age or ability depending on the variable of most interest to the psychologist, (e.g. Doise & Mugny 1984; Howe et al. 1992; Light and Glachan 1985). While these studies offered insight into how knowledge is socially constructed between children they did not take into account the



ways different interpersonal relationships influence this process. For example, Light et al (1994) showed that the mere presence of another child significantly affects children's performance on a simple computer task. This has led developmental psychologists to explore how interpersonal relationships such as friendships influence the social construction of knowledge between children (e.g. Azmitia 1998; Miell and Mac Donald 2000). These studies reinforce the view that the creation of shared meanings and new understandings between children in classroom and educational contexts requires conditions of genuine intersubjectivity such as those which exist between parent and child, between siblings, or amongst friends, (e.g. Dunn 1988; Göncü 1998; Azmitia 1998). These insights cannot be achieved through traditional short term experimental designs. They require longitudinal and observational studies that track how children's relationships change over time and how they develop the intersubjective understanding that underpins effective collaboration and shared problem-solving.

An alternative approach harnesses already existing relationships, (see Hartup 1996 for a review). For example, Faulkner and Miell (1993) established that young children work better when paired with their best friend than when paired with an acquaintance. In these studies care was taken to select genuine friendship pairs using both conventional sociometric techniques and friendship interviews. The interviews encouraged children to talk about their friendships and dislikes and were used to confirm the sociometry. Thus the children's own judgments largely determined the selection of the friendship pairs who took part in the observational and experimental phases of the studies.

Faulkner and Miell (1993) also carried out longitudinal observations of children's naturally occurring classroom interactions over the course of three months to supplement observations of friendship and non-friendship pairs carrying out collaborative tasks under more contrived experimental conditions. This multiple methods approach added weight to the conclusion

that children's pre-existing interpersonal relationships can have a powerful effect on collaborative learning. Multiple method approaches have become increasingly popular in recent years (Faulkner and Miell 2004; Kutnick and Kington 2005) as have ethnographic and participatory approaches, (e.g. Smith, Taylor and Gollop 2000).

Unfortunately, just as children have little control over the learning experiences they encounter in schools, they have little control over whether or not they wish to participate in experimental school-based interventions designed by psychologists. In spite of an accumulation of studies by developmental psychologists concerning the influence of children's relationships on collaborative learning in school settings, we still know next to nothing about how children feel about being required to work with an acquaintance, (or even someone they may deeply dislike), when they may normally prefer to work with a best friend or to work alone. While researchers generally seek parental and school consent for children to participate in classroom-based studies, the children themselves are still relatively passive in decisions about the goals, design and methods of research, and their willingness to be considered part of an experimental or control group, somewhat taken for granted.

A notable exception has been the research by Anne Smith and her colleagues in New Zealand on children's perspectives on their own learning. In these studies listening to children's voices and encouraging their active participation is integral to the research process, (Smith, Taylor & Gollop 2000). For the most part, however, in the interests of generating 'scientific' knowledge, researchers assume the power and authority to impose certain 'experimental' ways of working on children rather than listening to their views or respecting their preferences. This is regrettable nearly twenty years after ratification on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, which asserts children's right to be consulted a basic principle. The same principle is embodied in the *European Charter for Democratic Schools without Violence* (2004) that states that: all members of the school community have

the right to a safe and peaceful school. Everyone has the responsibility to contribute to creating a positive and inspiring environment for learning and personal development.

Like the studies by Smith and her colleagues cited earlier, the research studies described next have made significant progress in developing ways of working with children and young people that will eventually enable the principles enshrined in this charter to become reality.

### **Peer supporters**

While numerous strategies are employed by teachers to tackle bully/victim problems, Helen Cowie's research is distinctive in harnessing children's own energies and competencies in the process. Her starting-point is an understanding of the power of peer relationships in young people's lives. Conventionally, attention is focused on 'victims' who experience rejection, bullying and harassment, and 'bullies' who base their social relationships on an abuse of power. Cowie asks about the role of other members of the peer group - 'bystanders' who may collude, either actively or passively in bullying incidents, or attempt to intervene in a variety of ways. Cowie has argued that these young people can play an active part in reducing bullying, to the benefit of bullies, victims and themselves, provided school systems are willing to recognise young people not just as part of 'a problem' but as a key to its solution. Cowie has worked with young people themselves to initiate, offer training, support and evaluation to a range of school-based peer support systems (Sharp and Cowie 1998; Cowie 2004). She argues that where schools have implemented these strategies the emotional climate of the school undergoes a marked change. Instead of being based on competition, distrust and rivalry, the ethos becomes more oriented to care and responsibility for the needs and rights of all pupils in the school. Taking account of students' own perspectives on the process has been an important feature of the research. For example one secondary school student reported:

There was initial resistance from the staff. They were unwilling to give students the responsibility. The staff didn't really understand what we were doing, so we gave a small presentation in a staff meeting which helped to rectify this. But communication with staff has been a big problem. (Cited by Cowie 1998: 145)

### **Consulting with children**

Participatory principles, such as those embraced by Cowie , have encouraged increasing numbers of researchers to recognize the importance of valuing children's experiences and perspectives as important areas of study in their own right (Greene and Hogan 2005), and as an essential basis for developing genuinely child-centred policies. One salient example concerns the treatment of working children in Majority World contexts. Woodhead carried out a study of children's perspectives on their working lives in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Philippines and Central America. The main aim was to inform the debate about eliminating hazardous child labour with the voices of the children themselves. In a policy context dominated by protectionist views about children's needs, and their vulnerability to exploitation, the research elicited the experiences and feelings of those most affected by childhood work, and most affected by any interventions implemented 'in their best interests' (Woodhead 1998; 1999b; 2004). The starting point for the study was the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32, which is framed as about protecting children's 'development' from 'hazard' and 'harm'. Woodhead argued that conventional research into the harmful psychological effects of work is of limited value unless account is taken of children's active role in shaping their working lives:

With the possible exception of extreme cases of forced or bonded labour, children are not simply passive victims adversely affected by their work. They are social actors trying to make sense of their physical and social world, negotiating with parents and peers,

employers and customers, and making the best of the difficult and oppressive circumstances in which they find themselves. They shape their working lives as well as being shaped by it. Work does not simply affect young people. It is part of their activity and it becomes part of their identity. (Woodhead 1998: 19).

Workshops were set-up involving groups of young people engaged in lead mining, fireworks manufacture, weaving, brick-chipping, domestic work, market work, portering, street vending, shoeshine, fishing and associated trades, plantation work and various other types of agricultural work. Young people were encouraged to represent their feelings and beliefs in whatever ways were most meaningful to them, including drawings, mapping, role play as well as group discussion. At the heart of the protocol were a series of semi-structured activities and games focusing on key themes in children's lives, about family circumstances and parental expectation, experiences of work and school (positive and negative), self-esteem and personal identity. As far as possible children's own words shaped the preparation of the report, helping break down stereotypic views of childhood by illustrating diverse children's perspectives on the place of work in their development (Woodhead 1998;1999):

"A neighbour ....took me away from the village to Dhaka...I didn't want to go...but...my mother forced me to. The night before ... I cried a lot" (Domestic -Bangladesh).

"Our parents make us work. They tell us that we must go picking. That's what we're here for..to help with the work" (Farm work - Guatemala)

"No one forced me. I learned myself, out of curiosity...I had some friends, they went to get the material with their mother, I went with them and saw how they did the work, since then I've been working in my house on my own" (Fireworks - Guatemala).

"To work is a natural thing to do. Our friends do it. My parents work. My brothers work so why shouldn't I work? Even schooling is not an excuse not to work.." (Fishing - The Philippines)

The importance of consulting with children is now taken for granted in child labour research (e.g. Hungerland 2007), as it is in many other areas of social research (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). And participatory principles have been taken even further when children themselves research child issues, (e.g. Kellett 2005 and other chapters in this volume).

## **CONCLUSION**

At the beginning of this chapter we identified six broad issues facing anyone carrying out psychological research with children. We have only been able to sketch in some of the ways psychologists have been addressing these issues, and some of the ways they continue to face dilemmas that are in many ways inherent to the discipline. Principles of experimental design, measurement and statistical analysis remain central to undergraduate research methods courses. Moreover each major topic of research tends to have constructed a repertoire of procedures specific to the questions being addressed. For example, whereas Piagetian 'conservation' tasks dominated research on children's reasoning during the 1960s and 1970s (Flavell 1963), the so-called 'false-belief' paradigm was in the ascendant during the 1980s and 1990s, associated with growing interest in how children develop 'theory of mind' (Wimmer and Perner 1983). Considerable inertia to methodological diversification must also be acknowledged; due mainly to the status accorded these and other research procedures, which come to define legitimate approaches to enquiry. Another clear example is the Strange Situation, discussed earlier in the chapter.

More positively, some broadening of psychologists' approach to research is

evidenced in the content of recent research methods textbooks. Increasingly these include some treatment of qualitative alongside quantitative approaches, ethnographic research alongside structured observation, and discourse analysis alongside attitude scales (e.g. Breakwell et al. 1994; Coolican 1994). The Fourth Edition of one of the most widely used Child Development textbooks includes a brief section on 'Children as Researchers' alongside sections covering more conventional experimental methods, (Smith et al 2003).

In part these trends represent a willingness to look beyond the traditional disciplinary insularity of developmental research and are of value in themselves, in enriching our understanding of childhood issues. But methodological diversification also bears directly on the themes of this chapter in so far as alternative images of childhood are offered that might provoke developmental psychologists to adopt a more reflexive relationship to their subject, and become more explicit about the assumptions being made, and power relationships being played out through the research process (James 1998).

While we have acknowledged that much research continues to work within traditional scientific paradigms which treat the child as the subject of the research, new lines of research have opened up that place much greater emphasis on children as social and cultural actors. The studies we have cited as examples of this demonstrate that significant knowledge gains result when children's active participation in the research process is deliberately solicited and when their perspectives, views and feelings are accepted as genuine, valid evidence. In addition these studies demonstrate that psychologists must acknowledge the status and power differentials which shape (or have the potential to distort) the processes involved in carrying out research *with* children.

These methodological and attitudinal innovations are closely linked to social changes in the status of children described at the beginning of the chapter.

The image of the child as subject (or object) is gradually being replaced by the notion of child as participant. We noted that the British Psychological Society Ethical Code clearly marked the shift from 'subjects' to participants in the 1991 edition, but this was not consistently applied within the house-style of the British Journal of Developmental Psychology until 1996. Even at the end of 1998, one issue of the International Journal of Behavioural Development included some articles referring to children as 'subjects', alongside others that talked about 'participants'. It is a moot point how far these are merely rhetorical label changes, and how far they represent a more profound shift in frameworks of thinking about children's status in research.

Finally, we would caution that displacing an image of the developing child as subject or object with an image of the child as social actor, and active participant, must not result in the neglect of differences between younger and older human beings, in all their diverse expression. We must not throw out the baby with the developmental bathwater. Children are 'becomings' at the same time as they are 'beings', something which children themselves are very aware. Looking beyond the dichotomy is more productive than perpetuating it (see Uprichard, 2007). Respect for children's status as social actors does not diminish adult responsibilities. It places new responsibilities on the adult community to structure children's environment, guide their behaviour and enable their social participation in ways consistent with their understanding, interests and ways of communicating, especially in the issues that most directly affect their lives.



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