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EDITORIAL

The right to be properly researched: research with children in a messy, real world

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Introduction

Unless they focus on epidemiological debates, most thematic issues of social-science journals concentrate on research results, describing methods only as a means to an end. Nevertheless, the burgeoning field of research with children in the context of international rights-based programming has placed a new spotlight on epidemiological questions. What exactly (and what age) is a child when seen as the subject rather than object of research? How does this affect both methodology and method? Does the special social status of childhood imply new approaches and techniques, different ethical considerations, a novel role for researchers? Who should be a child researcher? What, indeed, are the human rights of children?

The impetus for this issue came from the twentieth anniversary of the date of the adoption, by the General Assembly of the United Nations, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 20 November 1989). The UNCRC provided a new impetus for child research because states parties were faced with the necessity to report regularly on progress towards achieving the human rights of children in their nation, including on a range of issues for which there were at that time neither reliable information nor appropriate research methods. In planning this special issue we wished to draw attention to the progress that has been made over two decades towards developing rights-based research with children, as well as to explore some remaining challenges. We are grateful to Children’s Geographies for giving us this opportunity, as well as for the chance to raise the profile of new scholarship, largely from the South, which comes out of a rights-based search for the best policies and programmes for children at risk. The contributions are all rooted in practical considerations, even when...
related to doctoral research. In many cases the authors have spent time working in programmes
with vulnerable children or youth before deciding to pursue, or recommence, academic studies.

This special issue of *Children’s Geographies* thus concentrates on how research with children
is carried out, rather than on results, although taking into consideration the way methodology and
method affect results. Our original invitation to potential contributors requested reflections on
experiences of the rights-based approach in research, as well as in subsequent policy intervention
processes. We were surprised – but entirely pleased – that the initial drafts we received focused
to a large extent on ethical considerations. Thus, we were guided by the authors through a
process that resulted in an overall concentration in this issue on exploring how ethical, scientific
research with children actually can, or might, take place. Far from providing all the answers, the
authors raise a variety of questions from a diversity of viewpoints, reflecting refreshingly on
ethical dilemmas of researching with children in what one paper calls ‘an inevitably messy
real world’ (Robson *et al.* this issue).

Almost all contributors are relatively new, but far from unknown, scholars whose careers have
been challenged by their origins, ethnicity, nationality and access to academic power. In the first
stages of their careers they nearly all had limited access to European literature, in which
academics from the Global North were working out the now-established theories that ‘child-
hood’ is an historically and culturally variable social phenomenon (Aries 1962, Qvortup 1991, for example), as well as arguing that children are competent social agents and creators
of meaning in their own right (James *et al.* 1990), while struggling to establish academic
institutions and journals focusing on the study of children and childhood. This history and its
debates are now so familiar to researchers from the Global North (among whom we undoubtedly
belong) that they have entered the realm of cliche. Yet both this discourse and the published
products remain largely unknown among researchers working in the Global South (among
whom we also belong). At one level this is not a problem, because the theories and topics in
the Northern discourse of childhood may not (as several contributors to this issue point out)
be particularly relevant to them, other than as a springboard to explore and analyse childhoods
in their own cultures. On the other hand, it can be a problem getting different, Southern ideas and
approaches ‘heard’ and respected within established academic spaces.

With the exception of one contribution, this issue is the work of young researchers carrying out
their own research in their own cultures, and reflexive in their approach. It is still more usual for
Northern researchers to carry out research in the South with the support of local (often quite high-
ranking) research assistants who may only be mentioned by name in the ‘Acknowledgments’
section of a peer-reviewed publications. We are pleased to note that such ‘extractive research’
is becoming less common, but it is still not easy for ‘beginning’ scholars from the Global
South to raise their concerns in a peer-reviewed journal. They are confronted by a variety of
obstacles, including lack of confidence in their English-language skills and limited access to lit-
erature, to say nothing of imperfect acquaintance with the critical forms of debate that are not only
acceptable in Northern scholarship but also mandatory. Criticism of anyone may be culturally
undesirable in some cultural settings, criticism of the work of a senior academic colleague
may be socially impossible and likely to be followed by negative career consequences.

In this context we are also led to reflect that there are far, far more children in the South than in
the North. According to the demographic statistics in UNICEF’s *State of the world’s children
2009*, only 9.2% of the group of human beings less than 18 years of age currently live in the
combined industrialised countries and industrialised areas of other countries (UNICEF 2008).
The new, rights-based approach focuses on the opinions, experiences of the 90.8% muted majority
of children. In this sense, our approach in this issue is political. We are concerned with (for
example) children who are only offered a bare five years of schooling (one cannot dignify it
with the name ‘education’) sitting on the mud floor of a dark, unventilated hut – alongside up
to 200 others – with a faded blackboard, worn slates and empty stomachs, plus a teacher who
has only passed secondary school and knows few methods of classroom management beyond punishment, sometimes in violent or humiliating forms. Through our experience of supervising comparative, rights-based research by local researchers asking children’s views of the physical and emotional punishment of children in eight Asian countries, we found our personal observations and suspicions over the years painfully confirmed. Child after child related experiences previously hidden by the powerful ‘voice’ of adults researching adult (teacher) behaviour, rather than the effects of that behaviour on children (Beazley et al. 2006). Thus, what we set out to do in this special issue is to explore not only the muted ‘voices’ of Southern researchers, but also the almost silenced opinions of 90.8% of human beings less than 18 years old.

Childhood and children

Part of our argument is that the difference between Southern and Northern scholars researching children is not a question of quality, but rather of gaze – combined with opportunity. And yet our experiences in both worlds suggest that there are, in fact, distinct approaches, each having its origin in the motivation behind the research. Predominant in the North is the new sociology (or social studies) of childhood, which (like the UNCRC) is now into its third decade. Based predominantly in Western Europe this is a largely academic discourse. Focusing on children’s agency and competence this has developed childhood studies to a relative degree of prominence in several disciplines within a remarkably short period of time. Childhood studies are no longer as marginal within the social sciences as they were 20 years ago. Moreover, as children’s-rights monitoring for UNCRC reporting is becoming more demanding, there is a correspondingly increased demand for Northern academic researchers to become involved in research on children’s lives, in so far as they relate to policy and programmes. Particular attention is paid to service delivery of various kinds – health care, institutional care, schooling, sports, leisure and playground facilities all receive attention, as the pages of Children’s Geographies demonstrate. The scholarly literature is replete with debates on methodology and method, including considerations of the extent to which children can and do participate in research.

Parallel to this is the vast escalation in number of studies of children in the Global South, due in part to the correspondingly huge demand for information for UNCRC reporting, as well as for intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organisations planning programme interventions. In addition to lack of access to and knowledge of children’s-studies literature, one obstacle for such research is the scarcity of ethnographic studies of local childhoods. This void is too often plugged using a social construction of childhood that does not even appertain to most children’s experiences in the Global North where it was constructed. Studies of children in the South, moreover, concentrate on ‘problem groups’ (for example AIDS orphans, street children and child soldiers) and – lacking a local ‘normal’ childhood to compare to these ‘deviant’ childhoods – make causal inferences based on an alien construction of childhood. As Northern researchers working almost entirely in the Global South it is not surprising that we feel a certain degree of frustration, at times wanting ‘to challenge myths of the discovery of childhood with the straightforward assertion that children live real childhoods rather than social constructs’ (Ennew and Morrow 2002, p. 15).

This is compounded by the fact that some key concepts for child-research both North and South, such as ‘the child’, ‘the adolescent’, ‘youth’ and ‘the girl child’, are both essentialist and power-driven. Powerful adults construct ‘the child’, but powerless children are unable to construct ‘the [equally genderless] adult’. ‘The girl child’ is problematic, while ‘boys will be boys’. ‘Adolescent’ and ‘youth’ are constructed (largely in the North) as locations of problems, and, like childhood, exported South through ideological imperialism (Boyden 1990). It seems not to matter that children in the South do not pass through Piagetian developmental stages (Burman 1996) or that adolescence is neither recognised nor regarded as the location of...
existential crisis and raging hormones (we might go as far back as Margaret Mead in 1928 to debate that proposition). What happens is that the diverse gazes of the South are deflected into uniformity by the Northern terminology of international agencies.

In this issue, for example, Chakraborty argues that girlhoods are not uniformly experienced as submissive, but may be both negotiated and subversive. In their different ways, Lucchini (1996) and Punch (2001) have used ethnographic research to argue this for street children and rural children. With respect to the ‘good Muslim girl’ image, Chakraborty argues that:

Rather than perform the ‘good girl’ all of the time, the reality is that young women perform multiple identities at different times and in different spaces as they consciously navigate through private and public domains. (Chakraborty, this issue)

In addition, ‘girls’ are all too often elided with ‘women’ in women’s studies, and researched with respect to their socialisation into gender role as ‘not-yet women’ or ‘becoming women’. This repeats the tendency identified by Durkheim almost a century ago (Durkheim 1956), and so ably reprinted and used by Jens Qvortrup (1991): unless there is a sociology that has childhood as its object, children are forever analysed as ‘human becomings’ rather than human beings (see also Holloway and Valentine 2000). Likewise girlhoods and boyhoods are valid objects of research in their own right, not simply the locus of accounts of becoming female or male; girls already are female-gendered human beings and boys already are male-gendered human beings.

Similarly, essentialist notions of ‘the child’ and ‘the girl child’ tidy up the messy world. The women’s movement has at various times claimed girls to fall entirely within its remit, occasionally undifferentiated from ‘children’ including boys. In both cases, the failure to disaggregate specific groups of girl children whose rights are particularly violated has led to confusion of aims and policies. Meanwhile the notion of ‘the girl child’ has been reified, as if there is something essential about all female children regardless of wealth or ethnicity, something that makes them more vulnerable than boys in general. This focuses on vulnerability to sexual violation, early marriage, unplanned teenage pregnancy and is a new manifestation of the old control over women’s sexuality and fertility. It masquerades as concern for their vulnerability but actually implies that females cannot control their own sexuality, which should consequently be under male control (Ennew 1994).

The category of ‘the child’ bears a similar, but more differentiated, age-related implication, which is particularly noticeable in the target groups of research with children. The essential category ‘the child’ — ungendered and (below 18 years) age-free — is much easier for most people to think about and research with as if it consists of human beings between 10 and 17 years, than of infants or toddlers or school-aged children. The papers in this issue do not problematise age, but we would argue that it is both important and neglected. This area needs more work within a rights perspective. Childhood is not homogeneous, not least because of the evolving capacities and physical growth of human children. It is perhaps the most heterogeneous stage in the life cycle. Within childhood, age differences possibly outweigh gender, ethnicity, religion and other discriminatory factors. An indication of the crucial, but often taken-for-granted, influence of age is that most of the articles in this issue focus on older children, and even young adults. This does not have to be the case, but reflects the fact that working with the youngest children requires special skills and sensitivities, which one can get away with not having for children between 10 and 17 years (Dobbs 2002, Alderson et al. 2005, Kjorholt 2005).

The human rights of children

The UNCRC is part of the United Nations system of human rights, emphasising that children are entitled to all the rights and freedoms of respect, dignity, equality, expression, non-discrimination, life, and civil participation that are extended to all human being whatever
their age. In this sense, participation is not a new right for children in the UNCRC, but it is qualified because human beings under the age of 18 years do not normally have the right to national franchise. However, there is now considerable attention in academic discourse to the idea of the civil and political rights of children (see for example Invernizzi and Williams 2007). Moreover, the UNCRC adds protection rights, special provision rights and caveats to the human rights of children, which takes account of what the UNCRC calls their ‘evolving capacities’ and is related to the long-term recognition in human-rights and humanitarian law that childhood is entitled to special protection.

The UNCRC is frequently criticised — somewhat unjustifiably in our opinion — for not providing exact definitions of some terms and for not being culturally sensitive. Yet, if strict definitions had been provided it would not have been possible for this international treaty to be so widely (almost universally) ratified. The standards it sets out are deliberately broad and reflect consent on the input of governments from both North and South during the 10-year drafting process. They are standards to be achieved — which it has to be said no state party has yet done. No government was excluded from the drafting or adoption process, nor pressurised to ratify. There are also provisions for any state party to express reservations about specific articles that are not congruent with their national law and culture (UNCRC article 51).

The progressive achievement of UNCRC standards of the human rights of children have been developed in regionally specific form by the regional human rights bodies of Africa, the Americas and Europe. But perhaps the most important provision for the implementation of the UNCRC is that, once a nation-state has ratified, it is obliged to reform its domestic legislation to meet at least the minimum levels of UNCRC standards. Most states parties have, by now, passed comprehensive domestic child laws, although implementation and full realisation of children’s rights will take longer. Twum-Danso (this issue) gives a detailed account of this process in Ghana, discussing the difficulties of implementation of international law at national and local level, with particular reference to children’s participation.

**Rights and research with children**

Rights-based research with children acknowledges their agency, not as the outcome of academic theory but rather as recognition that they are subjects of rights. The difference may be subtle, but it is vital. The research we and the authors in this issue carry out is less concerned with proving children’s agency than with challenging the real-world notion that they are passive victims of abuse, exploitation, violence. The problem is that academic theory (an adult social product) tends to be disconnected from children’s lives.

This consideration returns us to somewhat older epistemological debates about the connection between academic theory and grounded, inductive research. While more traditional, deductive approaches to social research, based to a large extent on a false model of the physical sciences, begins with the development of a theoretical framework, rights-based research with children (or any other human beings who create and use meaning) requires an approach that reveals themes, patterns and differences within children’s experiences across times, places and cultures. This is not to commit the empiricist error of imagining the social world to be inherently ordered and the researcher capable of uncovering the ‘true’ order. On the contrary, the researcher is not the knower of truth, but rather the recorder and interpreter of multiple ‘other’ social subjectivities. Thus, once themes, patterns and differences have been revealed, inductive, grounded and rights-based research can contribute to theoretical understandings that reflect and enable deeper understandings of children’s lives and priorities as human beings. In this sense ‘being grounded’ is both good research and good human rights.

There are of course theoretical frameworks involved, which construct both society and subjectivities — for example, recognising children as subjects of rights and active social agents
as well as creators and users of meaning. In this sense we, and all the contributors to this issue, are in the recent tradition of Lucchini’s work respecting street children’s manipulation of multiple identities to fit (for their own benefit) different aspects (domains) of the adult world. These children are not lying when they tell disparate narratives, Lucchini argues, they are playing different roles in different adult domains (Lucchini 1996, see also Beazley 2003, Turnbull et al. 2009). Similarly, Samantha Punch’s ethnographic accounts of children’s negotiations with adults recognises children’s active, knowing agency in their own interests (Punch 2001, see also Abebe, Chakraborty and Twum-Danso, this issue). These children are not victims – even though horrible things may happen to them. Victim responses and behaviour sets are learned over time, and may therefore be more characteristic of adulthood. It is thus not surprising that adults tend to focus on victimhood in childhood studies, while finding resilience difficult to define and childhood resistance (and opinions) almost impossible to contemplate.

**The right to be properly researched**

Within the rights-based approach to children and childhood we have long been associated with the idea that children have the right to be properly researched. This right is not a specific provision of the UNCRC, but derived from interpreting a combination of provisions from four articles: the right to provide opinions (article 12), the right to freedom of expression using a medium of children’s own choice (article 13); the right to protection from forms of exploitation not addressed in other articles (article 36); and the right to the highest possible standards being used in work with children (article 3.3). In research terms this translates into: children being participants in research; using methods that make it easy for them to express their opinions, views and experiences; being protected from harm that might result from taking part in research conducted by researchers who use quality, scientific methods and analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. The right to be properly researched.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant article of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child</th>
<th>What it means for rights-based research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article 12 1. ‘States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’.</td>
<td>• Children’s perspectives and opinions must be integral to research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 13 1. ‘The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice’.</td>
<td>• Methods need to be found, and used, to help children to express their perspectives and opinions freely in research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 36 protects children against ‘all ... forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child’s welfare’.</td>
<td>• Children must not be harmed or exploited through taking part in research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 3 3. ‘States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, the numbers and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision’.</td>
<td>• Research must conform to the highest possible scientific standards. • Researchers must be carefully recruited and supervised.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Ennew and Plateau (2004, p. 29).*
The approach now associated with the right to be properly researched actually predated the idea, being used first in 1979 (Ennew and Young 1982) and in other examples before the UNCRC came into force in 1990 (Ennew 1986, Ennew and Morrow 1994). It has always involved what are now called ‘children-friendly’ methods, through which children can participate by sharing their opinions and experiences (articles 12 and 13 UNCRC) and systematic data-collection that results in analysis through both statistical and descriptive techniques (article 3.3). Further consideration of data-collection methods, children’s participation and ethical considerations were explored in various countries and processes during the 1990s, at the request of an ad hoc group including the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Save the Children (Sweden and UK), UNICEF and Childwatch International (Boyden and Ennew 1997). National studies on child-protection issues with local researchers were subsequently commissioned by UNICEF in Tanzania, Kenya and Bosnia and Herzegovina (see for example Ahmed et al. 1999, Robinson 2000, Čehajić et al. 2004). Two similar studies, on which we were joint supervisors and trainers took place in Indonesia (Hastadewi et al. 2004) and further studies have now been carried out in many countries, and on many topics (see for example Beazley et al. 2006, Beazley and Alhadad 2008, UNICEF Thailand 2008, Bangyai et al. 2009). Meanwhile several manuals have developed the practical approaches, ethics and methods appropriate to the right to be properly researched (RWG-CL 2003, Ennew and Plateau 2004, Abebe et al. 2009).

The remainder of our introduction to this issue examines the four articles of the right to be properly researched as they appear in the contributions in this issue. Following the lead of the contributors we concentrate more on participation (article 12) and ethics/standards (articles 36 and 3) than on methods of research (article 13).

**Article 12**

Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children’s opinions should be taken into consideration in decisions taken on their behalf. It follows that their opinions and views should be sought in action-oriented research about them, which should ask them as well as adults about their lives. This should also be participatory research – with them rather than about them:

> The principle of participatory research is that the people whose lives are being studied should be involved in defining the research questions and also take an active part in both collecting and analysing the data. (Ennew and Plateau 2004, p. 15)

Participatory research with adults has a comparatively long history and a battery of research techniques that are often used now with children (Boyden and Ennew 1997). But these were not used comprehensively to target children until the mid 1990s (Johnson et al. 1995).

Article 12 is not just a right on paper, it has practical outcomes for researchers. Yet there is little consensus about what it means in practice – in addition, as Twum-Danso (this issue) points out participatory research with children is attractive to donors – and thus although done often is often not done well (if indeed it is participatory at all).

Rights-based it may be, but simply adopting a participatory approach to children – even requesting permission to talk to them can be problematic. Abebe (this issue) notes that:

> ... socio-ethical challenges emanate from introducing ‘participatory’ methods into practice in communities where the local ethos of childhood views children less as autonomous individuals and more as members of the larger family collective.

Twum-Danso (this issue), in Ghana, and Abebe (this issue), in Ethiopia, found that cultural rules of seniority affect access to children, as indeed they do worldwide. Intergenerational hierarchies are complicated by gender and marital and reproductive status, as Jabeen (this issue) points out, as well as by the politico-economic statuses such as class. Nevertheless, we challenge the idea so
frequently voiced that ‘participation is not traditional, in our culture’ – it is not traditional in any culture (including for many adults). Participation can cause as many problems, and challenge as many taken-for-granted assumptions about children ‘being seen and not heard’, in England and Australia as it does in Peru, in Senegal in Indonesia or anywhere else for that matter. Moreover, participation with adults or children, in research or in governance does not happen instantly, but has to be developed, promoted and, above all, practised over time:

Participation is a process in which ‘ownership of the problem’ is increasingly shared between researchers and researched. In the first instance, researchers are likely to own the research problem and design the research, using methods that enable stakeholders to express themselves. Working directly with stakeholders (including children), and gradually handing over responsibility to them for setting the research agenda, will change the role of researchers to ‘facilitators’, and turn the research process into a joint project. (Ennew and Plateau 2004, p. 15)

Jabeen’s account of two consecutive research processes shows that the establishment of children-focused, participatory research can be progressively achieved at different levels of a transformatory practice. Thus, in this issue, in addition to Jabeen’s descriptions and Twum-Danso’s challenges, Chakraborty describes girls choosing the theme for her PhotoVoice method with them, while Robson et al. (this issue) grapple with the practical problems of including children as ‘research assistants’. Finally, Eversole’s ‘viewpoint’ (this issue) describes the advantages of involving children at all stages of research, from programme design onwards.

**Article 13**

Article 13 implies that appropriate, children-friendly methods are required to facilitate children’s freedom of expression. One culturally appropriate method Chakraborty (this issue) describes for her research in India is based on yoga. An early example of the culture sensitivity in choosing methods for research with children was the shift made by Johanson et al. (1995) in rural Nepal. Children were not accustomed to drama and role play, but were happy to express their ideas by composing songs, according to village custom.

The papers in this issue describe or refer to many methods, and more than one author emphasises the importance of using many different ways of exploring ideas and experiences with children, particularly with respect to the scientific importance of triangulation. In this respect we would emphasise that a vital component of the right to be properly researched, from its inception in the late 1970s has been the systematic collection of the kind of data often mistakenly described as ‘qualitative’, so that it can be subjected to statistical analysis ((RWG-CL 2003, Ennew and Plateau 2004). We have found that, once seduced by the idea of participatory research with children, even established academics will, for example, collect hundreds of drawings but, once back in the university, cannot think what to do with the pictures because they have not been collected systematically. The result is reports based on the staple methods of questionnaire, interview and focus group discussions, illustrated with children’s drawings and boxed examples of their ‘voices’, so they use them as illustrations, likewise children’s opinions are treated as ‘voices’ and put in boxed examples. Children’s words and pictures are worth more than this – and their right to give their opinions should not be reduced to anecdotes, presented as ‘authentic voices’. Moreover statistical information is essential for influencing policies as well as designing, implementing and monitoring programmes.

**Article 36**

Ethics are a common preoccupation of all the contributions to this issue. By this we mean, not the commonplace ethics of university ethics committees but the ethical dilemmas of working with vulnerable children, when shifting sets of dilemmas and cultural considerations sometimes make
nonsense of university checklists (Morrow and Richards 1996). Some ethics committees are moving to recognise this. Further, more rapid, shifts are to be encouraged. However, research that is commissioned by governments, intergovernmental organisations and nongovernmental organisations is bound neither by ethical committees nor by professional ethical standards – indeed ethical considerations may be entirely absent from both research design and research practice. Jabeen (this issue) in her account of earlier experience of research in the Punjab notes that ‘While the terms of reference called for recommendations to take account of the guiding principles of the UNCRC, there was no requirement that the research itself be underpinned by such principles’.

We do not deny that formal ethical processes have their place – indeed some kind of peer-governed setting and monitoring of ethical standards is vital if children’s rights to protection are to be met, including the stricture to social scientists as to medical researchers that they should ‘do no harm’. Yet all too often, as Virginia Morrow and Martin Richards pointed out in their seminal article on ethical principles in research with children, the medical model leads to over-formal rules, based in clinical research, which either do not fit, or miss altogether the ethical dilemmas thrown up by the real and messy world. In our opinion, ethics committees would be better able to foster ethical research if they were more aware of the kinds of issues that the authors in this issue grapple with. Two principles stand out and are discussed by almost all contributors—voluntarism, expressed in the idea of ‘informed consent’, and confidentiality.

**Voluntary participation**

‘Informed consent’ means that research participants have been informed about all aspects of the research: as a minimum the purpose, what is expected of them, the methods, the person or organisation carrying out the research, and how the information will be used and by whom. They need to be assured that the information is confidential and that it will not be possible for people unconnected with the research to identify them. They should also be aware that they can refuse to take part, or stop their participation at any time, for any reason, without negative consequences. This is increasingly referred to as ‘informed dissent’ (Ennew and Plateau 2004). It is becoming common practice to treat informed consent as a legal requirement, with a document to be signed, as well as for the consent of adults – parents, teachers, caretakers, guardians – to be sought first, before children are involved.

The act of signing consent forms has several implications in different settings, where people are illiterate (Abebe, this issue) or reluctant because giving a signature implies possible legal implications (Jabeen, this issue) or afraid of repercussions because of armed conflict (UNICEF Thailand 2008). In addition, as Abebe points out (this issue) ‘it may not be clear which parental figures have the right to give or withhold permission’. Ahsan adds (this issue) the question that it is difficult to judge if consent or dissent are ‘real’, in an honest and valuable discussion, leading her to conclude that ‘I am not entirely confident that a young person’s failure to dissent always signalled their voluntary consent’.

In rural Southern contexts local village heads are vital gatekeepers if access to community members of any age is to be possible. Ahsan (this issue) writes:

> [Even before I could seek their consent, I first of all had to negotiate for access with various hierarchies of adult gatekeepers . . . This made the young people vulnerable to power imbalances in the research settings, since they were unable to exercise their independent choice free from the influence of their adult guardians.]

Ahsan also describes how her status as a former NGO colleague in an organisation meant that:

> I had little control over the information given to the young people by others. The presence of various adult gatekeepers (teachers, parents, CBO/INGO staff) meant that the information about my research was filtered through their lenses. (Ahsan, this issue)
The process of delineating a research target group can also raise ethical as well as practical dilemmas. Identifying children as ‘AIDS orphans’ or ‘street children’, for example can be both stigmatising and humiliating (Abebe, this issue). Not all researchers are faced with a situation in which a village headman lines up 10 children outside his house in full view of other villagers and presents them to researchers as the community AIDS orphans (personal communication, Suleman Sumra, coordinator of research described in Ahmed et al. 1999). Being confronted with such a situation provides a researcher with a sudden, acute ethical dilemma about what to say and do. In addition, children might also reject a descriptive category, such as ‘street child’, ‘child commercial sex worker’ or ‘child prostitute’, preferring to see themselves as ‘working child’ or someone who ‘entertains foreigners’ (Jabeen, this issue, Montgomery 2007). To fail to take into account children’s own self-perceptions when describing their lives is to violate their dignity. And dignity is the touchstone of human rights.

An additional practical issue is that assigning a human being to a category – AIDS orphan, for example – may not be straightforward. Children may have lost contact with parents, may not know if they are alive or dead. If they are deceased the child may have no medical certificate of cause of death, no certificate may have been issued, or the diagnosis may not have included adequate HIV testing (Abebe, this issue). All these factors can affect samples and analysis in very fundamental ways, resulting in false conclusions that are all the more worrisome if the research is used to develop policies and programmes. Abebe’s contribution to this issue describes how he avoided this dilemma by focusing not on categories of children but rather on their ‘place in economic and social reproduction within their families’ situated in the broader political, economic and social contexts with which they have to engage.

Confidentiality and privacy

The same social hierarchies and cultural mores may make it difficult to work with children away from the influence of adults, or even to provide correct information about the research. Gaining access to research with children separate from adult influence is also likely to be problematic, perhaps especially for researchers working in their own cultures who share the mores of politeness of their ‘research subjects’. Any challenge to the rules of seniority – even in the ethical cause of maintaining confidentiality – may be seen as a threat.

Another specific problem identified in these papers is that children may be so eager to help a researcher (who is a person of greater status) or be unaware of the consequences of discussing private matters in a group discussion that they may disclose confidential information about other people, with negative consequences for themselves or others in their community. In such cases, researchers have a duty of protection, but may have to react quickly to a sudden ethical dilemma. As in modern moral philosophy, ethical decisions are situational. Each day in the field, each group of children, each moment may provide occasion for a troublesome decision in which the ethical priorities, as well as the methodological imperatives, may have to be ranked and weighed according to the priorities of the situation, entailing: ‘considerable negotiation of ethical spaces and roles between me (the researcher) and the children (the researched)’ (Abebe, this issue).

Who are the duty bearers?

Rights are fulfilled when the responsibility or duty to fulfil them for others is borne by groups, individuals or organisations. The academic research community bears an important responsibility for promoting and – to the extent that this is possible – monitoring ethical standards in research. When research with children is not carried out by academic institutions it is usually oriented towards children’s rights. Thus, it might be efficacious to stress the relationship between rights and ethics in order to develop more comprehensive ethical frameworks, and to target governments in their role as the principal duty bearers for the human rights of children.
Government research committees should play a greater role in ensuring that ethical standards are met in research with children – indeed in promoting such standards rather than limiting their activities to licensing researchers and research projects.

**Article 3**

We have found through experience that the best action-oriented research results from a process in which all researchers (including children) have a stake in all aspects of the research, from identifying the topic to writing the report and disseminating the results (Eversole, this issue). Yet, when children are included as researchers or even as research assistants, the question arises ‘Where should the adult researcher position him/herself in the process of children-focused, rights-based research?’ Positionality is discussed by several authors in this issue. Robson et al. insist that there is always a role for adults in research with children – even if children are involved in all aspects. Abebe challenges the idea of adopting the role of ‘atypical’ or ‘incompetent’ adult, citing Corsaro (1996), who was, after all, working in pre-school settings. He also questions the ‘least adult role’ (Mandall 1991). Our question on this is that researchers should not ‘adopt an [instrumental] role’ in rights-based research. Methodologically speaking surely being an ‘atypical adult’ also presupposes what children would see as a ‘typical adult’ and might affect the data. Or is the aim, as Jabeen (this issue) suggests, following Mayall (2008), to become a ‘familiar figure’ for whom children do not ‘behave in special ways’. Our position is that children-focused research does not mean excluding adults as either participants or researchers. For the foreseeable future children will need adults to at least channel resources, legal status and permission, dissemination (Van Bueren 1995) – as well as to protect them by maintaining ethical standards, as is their responsibility under the provisions of the UNCRC.

**Culture and researchers**

As several contributors to this issue discovered, it is unwise to assume that sharing the same language and culture as the research participants will make research go smoothly. Age, ethnicity, gender and marital status, as well as education and class – in other words the distinctive status markers within a culture – can threaten to wipe out any advantages of shared national language and culture. It is also not, as Ahsan (this issue) found out, easy to change from a role within an NGO to the ‘objective–observer’ role of researcher; ‘beneficiaries’ may not wish to make a convenient-for-the-researcher parallel move to ‘research participants’.

Moreover, a culturally appropriate reaction on the part of researchers in their own cultures may be judged inappropriate by the wider academic community, and might therefore be repressed in an account of fieldwork. Thus, Ahsan’s statement (this issue) that she had felt insulted when a teenage boy drew a sexually explicit picture might raise criticism from some quarters, because academic debate about reflexivity seems to focus on the politically correct aspects of professional culture, and to shut out issues that may be important to researchers from different backgrounds. We would argue that Southern researchers should be allowed (or, to put it better, encouraged and respected) to reflect honestly on their experiences of the research process. For Ahsan to have hidden her reaction and pretended that she is not influenced by her own culture would have been at odds with the principle of transparency in reflexive practice.

Cross-cultural respect and intergenerational respect are standards – given in the UNCRC (article 30 and passim). Respect for the dignity of others is, as already stated, the core value of human rights – ‘all [children, women and] men are born equal’. Standards certainly need to be set but they should be negotiated rather than imposed. Once again there is a clear role for both governments and the academic community to guide and promote ethical, scientific, rights-based research with children.
In conclusion

The global spread of the seven contributions to this issue includes Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Fiji, Ghana, India, Malawi and Pakistan. Starting with Twum-Danso’s reflection on participatory research within the current culture of children’s rights in Ghana, the two following papers, by Ahsan and Jabeen, illustrate their developing recognition of the positive elements and challenges of participatory fieldwork with children in Bangladesh and Pakistan respectively. Chakraborty describes the empowering effects of PhotoVoice, one of the methods she used with teenaged girls in Kolkata, India, and Vakaoti provides a detailed account of ethical dilemmas in field research with street-frequencing young people in Suva, Fiji. This is followed by Abebe’s reflections on the ethical implications of using multiple, participatory methods in research in urban and rural Ethiopia. Finally, Robson et al. (this issue) describe the practical issues that arose in working with young people as researchers in Malawi — and the adult researchers’ debates these issues provoked. The three viewpoints with which this issue ends are all written by colleagues who have experienced studies using the right to be properly researched approach in the field. Hastadewi and Setyowati were the coordinators of two parallel research projects in Indonesia, commissioned by UNICEF Indonesia, on which we were joint advisors and trainers between 2000 and 2003. Eversole manage and encouraged three successive national projects, which used and developing this approach in Tanzania, Kenya and Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1997 and 2004. Between them these contributions provide an insight into the relationships between rights-based, scientific research and the practical use of results in work with vulnerable children.

The conventional wisdom of doing research with children is changing rapidly, as Jabeen’s contribution makes abundantly clear. Sometimes this is a brutal change for established researchers and university lecturers. As we have found on more than one occasion, considerable resistance may be put up by senior participants [North or South] in a capacity-building workshop, who may feel their authority threatened and their prior research discounted. It can take considerable sensitivity (and reciprocal relationships of humour and respect) to encourage such researchers to try out the participatory, multiple-method approach. However we have yet to find one such researcher who, after experiencing fieldwork with children, does not become an evangelist, proving that, as Abebe (this issue) puts it, ‘fieldwork is a personal experience rather than a mere academic pursuit’.

If this approach transforms researchers, what are (and/or might be) the effects on children’s lives? We have all had the experience of children’s enthusiastic participation in research as described by Jabeen, because they have ‘never been asked before’ and are personally empowered by being given the opportunity to give their opinions and tell their experiences. Excited they may be – irresponsible they seldom are. A rights-based approach helps us to recognise diverse childhoods rather than constructing a single, universal childhood (Article 30 and various authors in this issue).

All the contributions to this volume eschew the romance and rhetoric of feel-good participation in research. Implicitly they recognise that in human-rights terms children’s participation belongs in discussions of citizenship. As Liebel (2008) has pointed out, scientific research is simply ‘systematic curiosity’. The real questions for fulfilling children’s rights in research concern how you ask questions (and whose questions), how well you collect data, and how well you do the analysis. Viewed in combination the papers in this issue constitute a challenge to and reworking of the complacency of much programme-oriented research with vulnerable children. The contributors write with refreshing transparency about their field experiences, challenge many assumptions and interrogate the processes of systematic curiosity in research with children.
References


