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3 Keeping them in Mind

3.1 Introduction

Over the past 30 years, a growing number of theorists have problematised long-standing theories of childhood, arguing that they fail to fully account for children's lived experience, the part they play in shaping and being shaped by the worlds around them, and their unique cultures and standpoints (Lee 1999, Corsaro 2005). Theories have emerged that homogenise children's experiences and either understate or overstate their vulnerability, capacity and agency. This paper presents these different (and often contradictory) conceptualisations and suggests that the process of reflexivity might help researchers (and theorists, practitioners and others) account for their approach and identify and respond to any challenges that arise.

This paper draws from my PhD study which invited 12 experienced children's researchers to reflect on their practice and how it was influenced by their own experience, by the academic field in which they work, and the broader social and cultural environments that shape what they know and how they know it.

3.2 Competing Conceptualisations and the Challenges of Researching Children

There is general consensus that childhood is a social construction which has been conceptualised in different ways and at different times, both within the general population and within academia (Alderson 2013). These conceptualisations have been influenced by the social, cultural, political and economic contexts within which children and childhood theorists exist and have evolved and devolved over time (Corsaro 2005). Rather than moving seamlessly from one conceptualisation to another, theorists and the community at large have often held aspects of different conceptualisations at once: often with little consideration of how the contradictions and limitations of different theories might best be negotiated (Cunningham and Morpurgo 2007).

Most conceptualisations characterise childhood teleologically and as a period of 'becoming': a period of pre-humanity within which the child passively learns, grows and develops towards adulthood (Qvotrup 2001). Children have commonly been seen as a blank slate on which adults forge the child's future character, knowledge and worldview (Thane 1981). Children are thus passive recipients with little influence over their development, let alone the worlds around them or the adults they encounter (Cunningham 2005). Their value has generally related to them in the future: who they will be and what part they will play (Archard 2004).

In many conceptions, childhood is seen as a period of innocence, naivety, incompetence and vulnerability (Qvortrup 1994): a period during which the child must be protected, educated and socialised so that they might become the best citizen possible as they enter adulthood. Unable to reflect on their experience, to act in their own best interests or to provide a perspective that is different to one that could be more articulately offered by an adult, children have been largely seen but not heard (Roche 1999).

Rather than seeing children as innocents, other conceptualisations have suggested that children are born innately evil, or more likely, with a potential for evil influenced by their nature, by exposure to adult knowledge, adult manipulation or abuse, or adults' neglect of their duty to provide children with idyllic childhoods or with stern development of character and responsibility (Fawcett 2008). At other points in time, children have been seen not as those who are corrupted but as those who corrupt: gang members, cyberbullies, teen sex offenders, provocative Lolitas, or rebels without a cause (Jackson and Scott 1999).

Adults have been held responsible for failing to provide children with these priceless childhoods and the consequences that having troubled or troubling children have for the society at large (Zelizer 1994). At times adults have been held responsible as a collective, as a community, as a broad family network or, within Beck's risk society (Beck 1992), as individual parents. At others, children themselves have been held accountable, particularly as they pass through the latter stage of childhood: adolescence.

To varying degrees, troubling children have been held personally responsible for their behaviours (particularly through the adolescent stages of their childhoods) (Hobbs 1982), but the responses to their indiscretions have varied over time: they have been harshly punished, fiercely protected, assertively educated and re-educated, actively excluded, or violently removed from abusive or neglectful parents or communities in the belief that someone else might do a better job and redress these failings (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern 1990).

In reviewing the literature, I would argue that there have been 12 dominant conceptions at play. I have summarised them in the table below.

Table 3.1:

Construct	Characteristics	Vulnerability	Competence	Agency / Participation
1. The Evil Child	Children are born evil and need to have evil educated and / or punished out of them	Children are vulnerable to immorality and poor adulthoods if innate evil is not redressed	Children are not competent to act in their own best interests or in ways that are not antisocial	Children's value is in the future, influenced by adults and negatively influencing society. Children are passive recipients
2. The Child as an Empty Vessel	Children are born without innate evil or innocence but passively acquire knowledge and temperament	Children vulnerable as a result of poor parenting and negative adult involvement	Children are immature and incompetent	Children are passively influenced by adults and society – no real attention is paid to how they influence or are agents within it
3. The Innocent Child	Children are born innately innocent	Children are vulnerable when exposed to adult knowledge, exploitation and harm	Children are immature and incompetent. Innocence and naivety promoted	Children are passively influenced negatively by adults and society. They have no agency
4. The Romantic Child	Childhood is a preferred state and one that is lost as they grow into adulthood	Children are vulnerable to corruption and to their childhoods being stolen by adults	Children are competent in understanding their worlds but not necessarily the adult world within which they live	Child's play and children's cultures are recognised. The influence they have on each other is recognised but not on adults / community
5. The Evangelical Child	Children need to be saved from the adult world around them and from exploitation	Children corrupted by employment, sexual abuse and maltreatment by adults. Great concern for poor children	Children have their own natures but these are non-adult and of lesser value	Childhood is contextualised within families. Children's rights are managed by adults who determine their participation
6. The Delinquent Child	Childhood marked by potential evil (external rather than internal)	Children are vulnerable to delinquency	Children are unable to curb influence of adults	Childhood scrutinised and controlled by adults for the good of children. They have no positive influence
7. The Studied Child	Children shaped by their environments	Children are vulnerable to poor health, psychological and educational outcomes	Children have developing competence but less so than adults	The State is responsible for children and for educating them. They have little agency

Table 3.1:continued

Construct	Characteristics	Vulnerability	Competence	Agency / Participation
8. The Psychological Child	Children developing within and as a result of their interactions with the environment and others	Children are at risk of poor outcomes, caustic environments that lead to poor outcomes	Competency is developed from childhood incompetence to adult competence	Children assimilate and accommodate knowledge and competence through interacting with environment. They have some agency
9. The Socialising Child	Children socialised to take on the conventional values and norms through social conditioning	Children are at risk of poor outcomes throughout life if not socialised properly	Increasing recognition of children's competence however children less competent than adults	Increasing recognition of agency although not all socialisation theories recognise children's influence
10. The Agentic Child	Childhood as a discrete period of life in which children make sense of their worlds and interact within it	Children are vulnerable as a result of structures and entrenched power differentials	Children are competent, have their own knowledge and can reflect on their place within society	Children are active agents influencing and being influenced by others and the worlds around them. Children are co-constructors
11. The Child as the Holder of Rights	Children are humans and hold rights.	Children are vulnerable due to their relative immaturity and incompetence – they have a right to be protected, to have their developmental needs met and to participate in processes that affect their lives	Children are competent but less so than adults. They have a developing capacity to act in their own best interests but adults care-take their rights until they become adults	Children influence and are influenced by the worlds around them. They have a right to participation – but often need adults to enable this to occur. Children's rights sit alongside parental rights (with some clashes)
12. End of Childhood	Delineation between children and adults is blurred. Children are exposed to adult knowledge and culture (often to their detriment) and adults fail to let go of their engagement with 'childish' activities and cultures	Children are vulnerable to being displaced, to being neglected by adults, to commodification and sexualisation	Children are assumed to be competent but may be required to do things that they are not prepared for / be responsible for things out of their control	Child-adult interactions are confused. Children heavily influenced by the media, by markets and by others who act to manipulate them. Children have limited capacity to protect themselves from manipulation

3.3 My Study

In 2009-12, I conducted an exploratory qualitative study that provided a group of experienced researchers the opportunity to reflect on their practice and the practice of research with children in Australia; to consider how they understand children and childhood, and how their research is underpinned and influenced by the assumptions they hold.

The study asked 8 experienced children's researchers to consider how factors in the research environment influenced their research practice: which challenges have they encountered and overcome in the often complex and 'messy' world of children's research?

The study included semi-structured interviews in which researchers were invited to consider how they conceptualised children and the impacts that conceptualising children in these ways influenced their research practice. Ultimately, my study posed three questions:

–   What are the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values held by researchers about children that underpin their research with children?
–   How do these assumptions, beliefs and values influence the broad research process?
–   How might reflexive practice be used to understand, account for and help guide the practice of research with children?

To place their reflections in context, researchers' writing was also analysed in terms of the key themes emerging from interviews. My study was therefore a reflexive one, as it provided researchers an opportunity to reflect on practice and to consider how their conceptualisations of childhood influenced their work.

3.4 Reflexivity as a Process Through Which Theoretical and Procedural Challenges might be Navigated

The practice of research with children is primarily related to the development of knowledge, but is also a political and social endeavour. Through the development of new theories about who children are, what needs they have, what contributions they make, and how they understand and respond to the world, children's positioning is reconstructed, and the ways that such theories influence practice are problematised and reoriented. But reflexive theorists also argue that the practice of research and the theorising that follows is also political and social, and is highly influenced by those managing that process and those relationships, either to the benefit or detriment of children.

Reflexivity has been proffered as a process through which many of the ontological, epistemological and axiological aspects of the self, of intersubjectivity and the colonisation of knowledge can be uncovered, explored and accounted for. Some have

argued that it is a way of increasingly problematising self-knowledge, of monitoring the self and the influence that one's own biases, beliefs and personal experiences have on qualitative methodologies and the creation of new knowledge (Rose 1997, Daley 2010). Although the concept is often used interchangeably with related concepts of reflectivity and critical reflection, there has been a growing consensus that reflexivity is more action-oriented and is characterised by an ongoing internal dialogue and critical self-reflection through which the researcher's positionality might be made explicit and the impacts of this positionality be accounted for (Sultana 2007).

In the feminist domain, commentators have stressed the value of exploring how one's own gender but also their lived experience of sexism, of their socialisation of gender roles, expectations, sexual expression and repression, and how this influences the way that they understand the world and relate to others within it (England 1994). In cultural studies, researchers are challenged to consider how their insiderness (or outsiderness) influences the lens through which they investigate particular subjects, how their own cultural values and histories shape the way they relate to subjects and research participants and make meaning of the data they gather (Merriam et al. 2001). Other reflexive researchers, particularly those inspired by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, attempt to turn the research lens back onto themselves and their research practice: taking responsibility for their own situatedness within the research process, and how their own biographies and experiences affect the settings within which research is conducted, those who they engage in research activities and how they interpret data and present findings. In these ways, reflexivity is presented as a process through which the production of knowledge as independent of the researcher and the research context is problematised (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Finally, reflexivity conducted at the team or academic field level has opened up opportunities to unsettle entrenched commonsense views and truisms that pervade what is known about particular subjects, and questions how these taken-for-granted theories or 'facts' have been reinforced uncritically (Barry et al. 1999). Feminists, for example, have used reflexivity to uncover the ways that predominantly male academics perpetuated gender assumptions and stereotypes and controlled the development of knew knowledge.

3.5 Re-Considering Vulnerability and Incompetence Reflexively

As illustrated in the table above, childhood has popularly been characterised as a period marked by vulnerability. From this perspective, children as a group are conceptualised as needing protection either from their own inherent evil or innocence, from adults who exploit or maltreat them, or from systems and structures that disempower them. A number of writers argue that these conceptions continue to be played out in both popular and academic discourses. Such discourses promote the need for adults as individuals (including parents, teachers, and children's workers)

and collectives (including societies, child protection systems, and welfare sectors) to intervene in children's lives (Christensen and Prout 2002).

Participants in my study universally recognised that children experienced some level of vulnerability and were reticent to adopt conceptions of childhood that understated this reality. They echoed the sentiments of Balen et al. (2006, 32), who observe that "failing to acknowledge childhood as a distinct phase in the life cycle, albeit arguably socially constructed, where differential competencies, responsibilities and vulnerabilities prevail, would be irresponsible".

A number of researchers in my study reflected on how their own childhood experiences, experiences as parents, and as teachers and youth workers influenced their thinking. Three observed, for example, that their experiences as parents helped shape, soften or realign their views on childhood vulnerability. On one hand, having raised children through infancy they reflected that they were aware of how dependent children could be and how they needed adults to keep them safe from harm. They said that having children helped them appreciate the level of this dependence and became increasingly aware of the protectiveness they had for their own children and, as a result of this, for children more broadly. They reflected that although they had come to parenting with a concept of children as resilient, this resilience was further revealed through the observed experiences of their children and their children's peers:

> I always thought that kids were resilient but in having children it became clearer to me as to how resilient they can be when given the right opportunities and chances. I don't know that I could have come to this view without having been surprised [by my children's capacity to cope] (RF).

Researcher participants had varying views about the extent to which this vulnerability was inherent in the child, in their relationship with adults, or within the systems and structures in which they lived and negotiated the world.

Children's vulnerability is often posited in terms of their physical weakness; their lack of knowledge due to their limited education, experience and cognitive capacity; and the 'normal' risks associated with being a child (Kelley, Mayall, and Hood 1997). Researcher participants were generally appreciative of these limitations, particularly when considering younger children. One, for example, talked about a newborn relative of hers and its total reliance on its parents for food, stimulation and protection. Although she acknowledged that this small child was interacting with its parents, and ultimately affecting them, she recognised that its dependence on adults in general and its parents in particular was significant. She observed that children's dependence afforded them adult intervention and concern.

Amongst the researcher participants, however, there was a strong view that by universalising childhood, theorists have been unable to recognise that children of different ages and stages have different vulnerabilities (and resiliencies), and that by holding totalising assumptions about children and their ability to protect themselves and manage the risks around them, children were often further marginalised and

oppressed. Researcher participants argued that researchers and theorists need to be upfront about which children they were theorising about, and how children of different ages, stages and experiences might have different needs and be conceptualised in different ways.

Although there was agreement that children were often vulnerable as a result of their relatively limited physical, neurological and experiential development, there was also a view that much of their vulnerability emerged as a result of the way that children are positioned within society. As such, it was argued that vulnerability was inherent in both children and childhood.

In this regard, participants echoed the observations made by Lansdown (1994, 35), who observes that this structural vulnerability exists "because of [children's] total lack of political power and their lack of civil rights". Lansdown (1994, 38) follows by arguing that:

> There is a tendency to rely too heavily on a presumption of children's biological and psychological vulnerability in developing our law, policy and practice, and insufficient focus on the extent to which their lack of civil status creates that vulnerability.

However, some researcher participants argued that the relational aspect between adults and children should not be overstated and that children's agency should be further appreciated when considering their positionality. A number gave examples of how children managed, negotiated and rebelled against this positionality; noting that through their play and in their interactions with adults more broadly, children had some control over how adults might be let into their worlds, be provided with status and recognition and ultimately whether they might be excluded. They stressed the value of not only listening to children but also watching them as they interacted with researchers during research activities, and reflecting on how children's behaviour might also give some insight into adult-child relations and the content being explored.

3.5.1 The Influence of Vulnerable Conceptions

When children are constructed as primarily vulnerable it becomes the responsibility of adults, systems and the State to 'protect' them from further harm and negative influence. Within many contexts, this has led to children being excluded from decision-making processes, in civic activities and from mechanisms (including research) through which they can co-produce new knowledge for fear that they may be harmed through their participation or rendered more vulnerable as a result. Ironically, this has meant that children have not been given opportunities to exercise their human rights nor inform the communities, systems or services with which they have engaged, sustaining them in vulnerable and oppressed positions.

Researchers in my study articulated a desire to redress this situation, particularly in the research context, but argued that this was often difficult as they encountered ethical tensions that they and others found difficult to navigate. Although they believed that ethics processes often excluded children, they were wary about removing them entirely, recognising that children were often vulnerable both emotionally and politically and that this should be navigated on an individual basis. They believed that it was important for individual researchers, research teams and ethics committees to have an ongoing dialogue (with children, where possible) to problematise their approaches to ethics and research and to create new opportunities for ethical practice. In recognising that children were often vulnerable, researchers argued for a better balance between children's participation and protection within the research context.

3.6 (Re)considering Vulnerability Reflexively

In their 2011 article, Jan Mason and her colleague Suzanne Hood reflect that research is never apolitical and research with children is conducted within a context in which the "political can no more be separated from the personal for children than for adults" (Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 494). By promoting children's agency, researcher participants can challenge the social order through the process of renegotiation of adult-child relations – whether they are engaged as participants or by treating them as co-researchers. However, as others have observed, there is also a risk that the research process can sustain children in disempowered positions and privilege adultist assumptions about their competency, their vulnerability and their broad life experience.

There was a view amongst researcher participants that reflexive practice needed to begin from the early days of designing and planning research projects. Firstly, researcher participants stressed the value of researchers (particularly those new to the field) spending time reflecting on how they consider children and their vulnerability. As seen, they advocated for conceptions of childhood that marked children as competent and encouraged researchers to consider how they might 'get over' limiting mindsets.

3.7 Negotiating Risks with Ethics Committees

In line with Bourdieu's notions of reflexivity, researcher participants believed that there was value in engaging in reflexive discussions within the broader academic field, unpacking notions of vulnerability and collaboratively navigating the ethical and methodological challenges that might arise. In particular, they stressed the value of developing an ongoing dialogue with ethics committees.

Researcher participants were of the view that ethics committees generally held conceptions of childhood that posed them as vulnerable and at risk of increased vulnerability through the research process. As such, in considering practical ways forward, they believed that further dialogue needed to be entered into with ethics committees, particularly around understandings of vulnerability.

Rather than seeing ethics as being primarily procedural, and ethics committees as gatekeepers whose sole role is to approve or disallow research, researcher participants argued for a reconsideration of the ethics process, advocating strongly for processes and procedures that responded to risk but allowed for children's participation.

They believed that it was the role of researchers who held contradictory conceptions of children and childhood vulnerability to work with ethics committees to consider questions such as: 'how might children's exclusion from research further disempower and exclude them?' 'How might vulnerabilities be understood within the research context and appropriate steps be put into place to ensure that those which become apparent are resolved at each point in the research process?' And, 'how might other conceptualisations of children and childhood be understood and be used to reframe ethical dilemmas and issues?' For this to occur, they were of the view that ethics committees needed to engage in reflexive activities with those working with children and those with a good understanding of their lived experiences.

3.7.1 Managing Researchers' Vulnerabilities

In addition to recognising and reflecting on the vulnerabilities that children may encounter within the research process, a number of participants were of the view that it is important for researchers to consider how the research experience affects them also. They, and other writers, recognise that when entering the research process, researchers can often delve into "unexpected and uncomfortable territory" (Davison, 2004, p. 381) where their own emotional security might be affected. Coles and Neerosh Mudaly observe:

> Qualitative research with vulnerable populations exposes researchers to a range of challenges during the research process that may have an impact on the researcher. These include the relationship that develops between researcher and participant, the counsellor versus researcher role, being empathic and sensitive to participant distress, and frequent exposure to participant trauma during the research process. (2010, p. 60)

3.7.2 Encouraging Conversations about Vulnerability and Children within the Broader Research Field

Researcher participants highlighted the fact that often their views, values and beliefs about children and vulnerability were different to, and sometimes opposed,

those dominant in the academic field and within the broader community. They had used a number of strategies to help navigate their way through the conflicts, tensions and "roadblocks" (as one participant put it) that emerged as a result of these differing perspectives, but argued that further conversation with key stakeholders across fields would be of benefit. So too, they argued, was there benefit in sharing their experiences with others who were new to the game and who were encountering similar ontological and epistemological inconsistencies and ethical and methodological dilemmas. One participant argued that those who were working through these difficulties had an ethical and professional responsibility to engage others in discussions, so that children were both protected from possible and often unforeseen risks through their involvement or non-involvement in research processes:

> Yeah and that's what we get, but I suppose that means that we frame research then as an ethical responsibility to each other and that's an ongoing – it's beyond the ethics committee. That's an ethical interaction with people and you can't ethically stand by and not do something. (SD)

3.7.3 Children's Competence and Incompetence

The second aspect inherent in many of the conceptualisations of childhood relates to children's competence or incompetence. Participants in my study observed that within society broadly, and within the academic field in particular, children are still primarily and uncritically understood as being incompetent and unable to reflect upon or articulate their experiences, needs or wishes. Such rhetoric reflects strongly held views within early psychological and developmental theories that assert that as children lack experience and cognitive capacity they are unable to fully appreciate their situation, environments and life worlds. Participants, like a number of key education, psychology and sociology theorists, challenged such assertions, arguing that from a very young age children are able to observe the world and to make critical judgments about these experiences. They argue that exposure to behaviours, relationships and experiences have more influence on children's ability to reflect upon issues than their chronological age.

> There are some things that I, as an adult, don't fully understand because I haven't been exposed to them. Yes, I can use my experience to develop hypotheses but I'm not speaking from experience. It's the same with children. They can talk about what they know, what they have thought about and what they have observed – and they do it from a child's standpoint. That's what we need to capture because ultimately it's going to be different [to that of an adult's experience].

There was consensus among the group, however, that such notions did not reflect their experience or their ways of seeing children more broadly. One reflected:

> I completely disagree. I vehemently disagree [with the idea that children and young people are incompetent]. I just think that young people, both in their interviews and in their lives they describe, seem to be incredibly able. And as I said before, I think I was just very surprised at their ability to reflect on their lives and try and make narratives out of those that were clear to them and to be able to look back and review things and look at them differently as they grew in maturity. (DK)

Researcher participants' views about children's competence were often shaped by their own experiences of childhood, through their tertiary education and from their practice experiences, either prior to or as part of their research careers. Three participants spoke about their childhoods and how they remember having in-depth conversations with adults around them, and in feeling involved in decision-making processes about matters that were important to them. These experiences shaped these researcher participants' views on children's capacity and the value that children place on these encounters. As one noted:

> I think it was also my personal experiences as a child and a young person that made me absolutely convinced that children are capable of knowing about their own lives – of having a say on their own lives – even if they may not be in a position to make a decision, just as adults are often not in a position to make a decision, but the children have to be part of that. (SB)

These researchers reflected that they drew from their own experiences of thinking about, talking about and learning about complex issues while they were young. As such their developing concept about childhood knowledge informed not only the way they encountered children in the present but also opened up opportunities to reflect on their own childhoods and how this influenced current practice.

> Maybe I think in the course of working with the children [in research] one of the things that started - struck me as I heard them say things or make sense of things I would start to ask myself about: "Was I like that?" And, "Did I have that ability to verbalise things in this way because I couldn't connect with my own childhood?" I started to question that about myself and that's when I started to notice a lot more, because I think they're sitting there and what is it that - seemingly not very smart children were able to say things that were so poignant and so clear. It revealed things about me, about my childhood, and that was informative as well. (NM)

For the participants who had worked with children in different contexts and professions, their views were very much shaped by their practice experience with children and the many conversations and interactions that they had shared.

3.8 Reconsidering Children's Competence

As seen, many of the researcher participants were of the view that the way that children experienced and understood the world was significantly different to adults. Researcher participants challenged traditional understandings of knowledge,

knowledge development and epistemology, arguing that they were adultist, and that these traditional understandings viewed adult knowledge as being more valid and of greater value than that of children's. Rather than dismissing children's knowledge as being non-adult knowledge, researcher participants argued that it held value for a number of significant reasons. As one participant summarised:

> What do I say about that? I say, as [children's researcher] Mary Kellett says, that children are the most competent commentators on their own lives. They know more about themselves. Adults are people too. I mean, see what we ignore is that there are varying degrees of competence in adults. I will speak out on things that I'm not competent on. It's the responsibility of other people to [scrutinise my input and determine its value]. (JM)

The implications of recognising children's knowledge as being of value were discussed by each of the researcher participants. They argued that the ways that children understood and made meaning of their experiences was different but in no way less complex or sophisticated than adults. They argued that children understood what it was like to be a child and to experience the world as someone at that particular age and stage of life.

As a result of holding this view about children's knowledge, researcher participants described how they were reticent to perpetuate what they believed were adultist observations about children and childhood, and spent some time considering the implications for theory and practice. They argued that it was necessary for those researching children to be clear as to whether they were reporting on their observations about children's experiences, or when they were reporting children's views about their experiences. In the latter case, they argued that the researcher must spend time exploring the child's inner world and present children's thoughts within the context of their own childhoods and their current experience. This, they believed, required a level of self-monitoring and reflection and an articulation of how their views influenced their practice being clearly acknowledged in their writing.

These views challenge the traditional notions of children as 'human becomings', and recasts them as humans who may have different ways of making meaning about and understanding the world, but whose knowledge is no less valid.

Participants also stressed the value of children's observations about the world not only because they illuminate children's own experiences and considerations but also because they could provide fresh insights about the nature of society and the place of both children and adults within it. In her interview, for example, one researcher drew from feminist standpoint theory and argued that, like women, children were an oppressed and marginalised group who could reflect not only on their positioning but also on the ways that adults interacted with each other and with children:

> Standpoint theory gives us a lens through which we can understand children and to also understand ourselves as understood by children. Like women have provided powerful observations about being a woman and not being a man, children can tell us what it's like to not be an adult, what they think it's like to be an adult and what it's like to be someone who's not yet an adult in an adultist world. (JM)

> Without the childhood researchers we wouldn't have a theoretical basis for looking at children, we wouldn't... their goal of looking at children's lives from children's standpoint is so important and I would actually think that some of the people who criticise don't understand standpoint theory or the importance of what they're doing and in particular their work on generations. (JM)

3.8.1 Children's Competence Greater than Suggested

Researcher participants challenged the view that universally children could not grasp adult concepts or participate in discussions about topics often considered incomprehensible to children (particularly as they moved into adolescence):

> I think we often misjudge children's capacity and competence either because we don't provide them opportunities to demonstrate their skills or knowledge or we involve them in activities that don't fit their needs or wishes. Because we've failed to explain a process or have been unclear about our expectations children haven't responded – and we see that as their lack of competence in understanding rather than our incompetence in asking. (SB)

They argued that they could justify this position as a result of their experience and success as researchers. They contended that those who were more ambivalent about children's competency were often so because they had not worked with children, nor seen first-hand what children were capable of knowing and articulating.

Although they recognised that children were often more competent than adults gave them credit for, most researcher participants were reluctant to suggest that because certain children were competent in many domains of their lives that they were competent in them all. What researcher participants did acknowledge was that children's reflective capacity did evolve and change but that this was no different to adults:

> It is true that children may not grasp particular concepts or ideas or, in fact, not have experienced the things that are being researched. But that is no different to adults. Children often have encountered and thought about many things – these are the things we should talk to them about because until we get these insights, our theories of childhood are going to be limited (SB).

By doing so, researcher participants recognised that there were limits to what children could understand and argued against placing children in positions where they were asked to comment on things outside of their experience or to explain things that they had not processed in the past. Although two of the researcher participants strongly advocated the reflexive capacities of infants and young children and their capacity to understand concepts such as research, consent and future harm, the group of researcher participants as a whole were of the view that some children may not have the cognitive capacity to understand what was being asked of them, or why and how their involvement might affect them in the future.

Lastly, researcher participants highlighted the flaws in the conceptual opposition of childhood and adulthood inherent in many of the dominant paradigms relating to childhood (Mason and Hood 2011). As Jenks (1982, 10) notes: "the child cannot be imagined except in relation to an adult ... it becomes impossible to produce a well defined sense of the adult... without first positing the child." Alongside this challenge to children's incompetency was a challenge to the notion that adults were always competent and children were not. As one noted:

> There are many things that I do not know, things that children know, a knowing that they are not given credit for or opportunities to articulate. (AG)

3.8.2 The Influence of Incompetent Conceptions

When children are primarily cast as pre-human and incompetent, their exclusion from community and from its processes is justified. Epistemologically, research that is carried out by researchers whose work is underpinned by such assumptions often relies on adults who are conduits of children's knowledge: making comment without engaging children directly. From an ethical point of view, children are often considered unable to act in their own best interests and therefore rely on adults (most often parents but others also) to agree to their participation and to determine how they might be involved. This often has led to a situation where children are again excluded when adults are reticent for children to participate – even when children are keen to engage in research when given the choice.

3.9 (Re)considering Competence Reflexively

Considering and accounting for these ontological, epistemological and ethical challenges was viewed as being imperative in research with children and deserving of reflexive practice.

3.9.1 Being Aware of one's own Theoretical, Ontological and Epistemological Position

Researcher participants were of the view that one's theoretical, ontological and epistemological positions had a profound influence on how, why and who did research with children, and what issues and experiences were explored and reported. They believed that children's competence should be recognised, but realised that this view was not always supported by others. They argued that when academics were

hesitant about children's capacity they should be upfront about this in their work. As one participant said:

> I suppose I try to be patient with that view [about children's incompetence] that's there because I do understand it ... [but] if in fact we don't trust children's accounts then we should be upfront about that and not attempt to do it. I think if we do trust children's accounts, this is not about giving away our authority as researchers or as adults or as anything else, this is much more about, you know, there's that whole idea that you can share power and still retain your authority [and credibility in an academic sense]. (AG)

Three of the participants believed that it was important, therefore, for researchers working with children to account for their positions, particularly in relation to children's competence, i.e. their views about children's ability to reflect upon and articulate in a research context. They asserted that this was particularly important when conducting qualitative research with children on topics not often considered considerable by children. One made the point this way:

> All I'm asking for is that [researchers become] ... aware of what [their] theoretical constructs are, because we all have theory. And the positivists aren't always aware of the constructs and criticise our work because they are working in a different theoretical space. (JM)

> [My advice is to just] read carefully, to be aware of epistemology as well as methodology, where they're coming from ideologically, um to talk to other people and, you know, use that tool of reflexivity to the utmost. Um, and to continue to question for the good of others. (JM)

3.9.2 Considering Methodologies and Methods

As Oakley (1995), Ansell (2001) and others have suggested previously, researcher participants were mindful of the fact that what they perceived to be 'child friendly' practice and tools may not always be the best for children or best for the research. Researcher participants in this study argued that in an attempt to be 'child-friendly', researchers sometimes developed research methods that were overly simple and lacked rigour. This was based on their assumptions about children's capacity to use existing research instruments, and the need for them to be activity-based and fun.

Researcher participants talked about the need to critically assess the methods that they use with children – an assessment that could and maybe should be conducted with children themselves. In addition to considering whether they are engaging (which they believed was important), researcher participants suggested that they also should be assessed on their ability to elicit children's views sensitively, meaningfully and rigorously, and to meet the research question itself. For those who had worked in the area for some time, this assessment was an iterative process, where old methods

were assessed and new methods developed to strengthen and improve practice. As one participant noted:

> It's about how can we get this better and every time we do something now we're finding we're buil-ding on what's happened before, rather than starting again and that takes a little while I think. But it definitely has advantages. We can be creative but we can ensure credibility at the same time. (AG)

Researcher participants believed that as a field, we need to be open to criticism and feel open to criticise or challenge.

3.9.3 Reflecting on Power

In addition to considering what the most appropriate methods were for engaging children, one participant proposed that it was important to use a political lens to consider the broader forces at play in determining how research with children is conducted. She writes in her PhD, for example:

> Underlying this argument is an assumption regarding the fixed competencies children are seen to possess which ignores the structural constraints and discursive resources both children and adults bring to participatory practices. (Hartung, 2011)

3.9.4 Considering Competence within the Field

Recognising the relative immaturity of children's research and the limited dialogue related to the ethical use of methods that occurs at the institutional level, a number of researcher participants called for more opportunities for children's researchers to come together to develop more responsive and appropriate protocols to help facilitate ethical practice, rather than hinder it.

> I think that to me the key is then in actually building networks of researchers who can share ideas and experience and provide good training and good support for researchers who are going to be going out and working with children so that in practice they know how to deal with those really tricky things that arise when you're in the field. (SB)

> Do we need to keep pushing through the barriers? We do. We need to keep identifying what they are and then getting success stories up basically and I think we need to look for opportunities too: where we can come together like the think tank where I met you in Sydney, because it does build our confidence about what we're doing but it plugs us into other resources and opens the picture up constantly all the time; have you thought about this, have you thought about that, is this person able to... (AG)

In some institutions, groups of researchers working with children have started discussing some of these ethical challenges and have reflected more broadly in practice.

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