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Ethnography in the Study of Children and Childhood

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In its literal translation, the term 'ethnography' means writing about people and it is the argument of this chapter that it is the use of ethnography as a research methodology which has enabled children to be recognized as people who can be studied in their own right within the social sciences. In this sense ethnographic methods have permitted children to become seen as research participants and, increasingly therefore, it is ethnography which is fast becoming a new orthodoxy in childhood research (see Qvortrup, 2000). In thus detailing this progressive journey, one which has witnessed the shift from children as objects to their being subjects in the research process, this chapter has two aims: first to detail the history and present scope of ethnographic research with children; secondly, to explore along the way the potential which ethnography has unleashed for our contemporary understanding of children's lives and thus for the study of childhood itself, both inside and outside the academy. In this sense, then, while ethnography may not in the past have been deemed a central methodology in applied or policy oriented social research, the research considered in this chapter demonstrates the appropriateness of its application (Wallman, 1997).[1]

Indeed, it may not be too far fetched to claim that the *social* study of childhood – and here I include some of the research contemporarily being carried out by sociologists, anthropologists, educationalists, psychologists, historians, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and those working in applied social research – has only been made possible through the use of ethnographic approaches, for what ethnography permits is a view of children as competent interpreters of the social world. This involves a shift from seeing children as simply the raw and uninitiated recruits of the social world to seeing them as making a contribution to it, a changed perspective which has steered researchers towards doing work 'with' rather than 'on' children (Alderson, 1995). This reflects the developments occurring with respect to children's rights outside the academy – such as the UN Convention 1989 and, in England and Wales, the Children Act 1989 – which, in turn, represent broader perspectival shifts with regard to the social status and position of children: first, a recognition that, although children are members of an age category nominally called 'the child' to which particular expectations and values are ascribed, they participate and share in a cultural space termed 'childhood' which varies extensively across time and in social space; second, that through their participation as members of this particular generational space, through occupying a particular position in the life course, children themselves can be said to help constitute that space in culturally and historically distinctive forms.[2,3] And it is has been through the use of ethnography that the everyday articulation of some of these latter processes has been able to be described and, later, theoretically accounted for (James et al., 1998).

What then is meant by 'ethnography'? Although it is not my intention here to show directly what the study of children has done for ethnography – albeit along the way some observations might be made in passing – a working definition is necessary at the outset for, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 1–3) note, the term has been variously and vicariously employed. This chapter takes as its starting point, therefore, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1973) definition of doing 'ethnography' as being an interpretive act of 'thick description'. He writes

that 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' (1973: 9). What ethnographers do, he suggests, is to try to analyse or make sense of the 'structures of signification' which inform people's actions (1973: 9–10). This interpretive understanding evolves but slowly; through immersion in the lives of those we seek to understand, over a lengthy period of time, across a range of social contexts, and involving a variety of different kinds and levels of engagement between the researcher and his/her informants. In this way the 'doing' of ethnography might encompass a range of different qualitative research techniques within its orbit; from unstructured interviews through to casual conversations, from the simple observation of the comings and goings of people in their everyday lives to full participation alongside them in different kinds of work (Hammersley, 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).[4] What remains central throughout, however, is the commitment to an interpretive approach for, although by no means the only method for studying children and childhood, ethnography expressly facilitates the desire to engage with children's own views and enables their views and ideas to be rendered accessible to adults as well as to other children.

The following sections outline the progress made towards this position. This is followed by a discussion of some of the methodological and ethical considerations which arise when conducting ethnographic research with children. In doing so the chapter charts, then, the shift from a predominantly adult-focused concern with child socialization and acculturation to a more child-centred view which sees children as social actors, a movement which has been largely facilitated through the widespread and increasing popularity of ethnography as a method for researching children's lives.

EARLY ETHNOGRAPHIES OF THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

It is within social anthropology that some of the earliest examples of ethnographic work with children are to be found and although these studies are marked extensively by what Boas has termed the 'cult of childhood', through which children are seen as the 'paradigm of the Ideal man', these very early accounts already bear witness to the potential ethnography has for the study of childhood (1966: 9).

For example, despite being steeped in evolutionist and racist assumptions about the proximity of 'the noble savage' to the natural world, Kidd's (1906) study of Kafir children, based on participant observation fieldwork, offers a detailed and descriptive account of children's play and social lives comparable with many contemporary accounts in its close observation of what children do. However, although

the use of ethnographic methods produced some fascinating insights into children's lives in the developing world in the first part of the twentieth century,[5] like the studies that were to follow, these early ethnographers' accounts of childhood were part of a larger project in which the study of children *per se* was simply a means to a greater end. In this instance their studies were shaped by the overarching concern of that era with social evolution and cultural development. The ethnographers were not concerned to articulate children's own perspectives. Rather they hoped to prove that the historic roots of Western civilization were to be found in so-called 'primitive' societies and, for them, 'savage childhood' – Kidd's book goes by this title – thus clearly held out the promise of a natural laboratory for such an endeavour; here, if anywhere, were surely to be found the earliest roots of modern society? Thus, for example, in his critique of Kidd's study, Raum notes that

> Kidd is obviously far too anxious to show in the mental development of the Kafir child the emergence of those logical confusions between the self and its environment which formed part of the then prevailing theory of animism. (Raum, 1940: 27)

This use of childhood and the study of children as the location for the study of broader social values, and that of ethnography as a method for observing their inculcation in children through daily life, later became a hallmark of what has become known as the culture and personality school of American anthropology which flourished during the 1930s and 1940s. Most famously this is represented by the work of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. However, interest in culture and personality has continued within social anthropology, albeit less prominently, with the publication in the 1960s of, for example, Whiting's (1963) study of child-rearing in six cultures and, more recently, Le Vine et al.'s (1994) account of child care cross-culturally. What unites all the researchers within this tradition is their use of ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation, to observe in everyday life how it is that children learn to take on or are taught the core social values of their particular society.

Thus, for example, in her 1930 account of childhood in New Guinea Mead's intention is stated clearly in the opening paragraph. Using Manus society as 'one kind of laboratory', she wishes to explore the 'way in which each human infant is transformed into the finished adult' and to see 'how much or how little and in what ways it is dependent upon early training, upon the personality of its parents, its teachers, its playmates, the age into which it is born' ([1930] 1968: 9).

And it is the ethnographic method of participant observation which she hails as the key to achieving such an understanding:

> The religious beliefs, sex habits methods of discipline, social aims, of those who constitute the child's family,

can all be arrived at by an analysis of culture itself. ([1930] 1968: 211)

In Mead's view it is the ethnological training of the anthropologist – a familiarity with the native language, knowledge of kinship systems and so on – which facilitates this understanding. The ethnographer as a participant observer in another society,

> is willing to forsake the amenities of civilised life and subject himself [*sic*] for months at a time to the inconveniences and unpleasantness of life among a people whose manners, methods of sanitation and ways of thought are completely alien to him. He is willing to learn their language, to immerse himself in their manners, get their culture sufficiently by heart to feel their repugnances and sympathise with their triumphs. ([1930] 1968: 213)

Thus, in her account of growing up in New Guinea, it is this daily immersion in the everyday lives of the children and adolescents which enables Mead to provide rich and detailed documentation of family relations, early education, children's work and social lives, to recount young people's attitudes towards sex and the relationship between children and adults in Manus society. It is this method which also allows her to argue for the cultural shaping of personality. She notes, for example, that Manus parents have a very different attitude from their American counterparts towards helping children adapt to the dangers of the external environment, a difference in child-rearing practices which, she argues, shapes later, adult personalities. She illustrates this through a detailed description of an often observed and everyday childhood occurrence:

> a [Manus] child who, after having learned to walk, slips and bumps his head, is not gathered up in kind, compassionate arms while mother kisses his tears away, thus establishing a fatal connection between physical disaster and extra cuddling. Instead the little stumbler is berated for his clumsiness, and, if he has been very stupid, slapped soundly into the bargain. ... The next time the child slips, he will not glance anxiously for an audience for his agony as so many of our children do; he will nervously hope that no one has noticed his *faux pas*. This attitude, severe and unsympathetic as it appears on the surface, makes children develop perfect motor coordination. ([1930] 1968: 30)

The later study by Le Vine et al. of Gusii society in the 1970s similarly draws on in-depth, observational fieldwork to explore the processes through which Gusii children are taught to become adult members of Gusii society. The fieldwork methods which were adopted were described thus:

> each child would be studied with naturalistic observations at home and in a setting amenable to video recording ... The interpersonal environment of the child and the nature of caregiving and interactions between the baby and others, were to be in the foreground of the research. (1994: 277)

This was to be achieved by detailed, minute by minute observations, carried out at particular points in the day, observations which could then be interpreted by placing them within the framework of a more generalized understanding of Gusii society achieved through the long-term familiarity which participant observation fieldwork provides. Like Mead, this method enabled Le Vine et al. to offer comment on Gusii cultural understanding of how it is that children learn to become members of Gusii society. Thus, for example, in direct contrast to the values ascribed to in Manus society, as depicted by Mead, the Gusii conceive of exploration by young children as a dangerous, rather than a normal aspect of child development, and take steps to discourage it:

> Satisfaction with the developmental accomplishment of walking is qualified by the concern that the child might stumble into the cooking fire or otherwise become injured. Thus at 12 to 15 months of age the sample infants were still being held or carried in 42% of daytime observations, though most had been able to walk since 9 months. (1994: 253)

And in contrast to American mothers,

> praise is explicitly rejected by Gusii mothers as a verbal device that encourages conceit and would make even a good child rude and disobedient. (1994: 254)

However, in such ethnographic studies children's own views on the process of socialization are given but little prominence when contrasted with the emphasis given to the child's perspective in more recent work (see below).[6] The interpretations offered derive largely from the ethnographic observation of adult–child interactions and adults', rather than children's, accounts of what cultural learning involves. In part, as noted earlier, this is because their focus is on the larger question of *what* adults teach children about culture through their child-rearing practices, rather than *how* those lessons are learned by children. But, in demonstrating the quality and value of the data to be derived from empirical and closely observed ethnographic accounts of child-rearing practices, the culture and personality studies did, none the less, pave the way for the 'new paradigm' for childhood studies in the 1970s for, within this, ethnography too has become championed as a method (James and Prout, 1997).

Through their use of ethnography, the culture and personality studies offered, therefore, an early platform from which to begin to mount a serious challenge to universalistic accounts of childhood and children's development. In this way they represented a stark contrast to the purely theoretical accounts of socialization being offered from within sociology which, up until the 1960s, remained wedded to a unitary developmental perspective on childhood (James and Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998). Drawing extensively on Piagetian psychology, within this tradition

socialization was regarded as a more or less one-way process – as what adults do to children – and as a process in which children themselves had little part to play. It was accounted for theoretically in terms of a thesis about cultural reproduction which endeavoured to explain how children learn or, more correctly, how they are taught their social roles in society (see for example, Elkin and Handel, 1972). Devoid of any empirical account of real children's life experiences, comparable with those offered by the culture and personality writers, these studies simply and uncritically imported what Rafky has termed 'a vague, somewhat muddled ... excess of "psychologising" into the sociological arena' (1973: 44). They took little account of the cultural specificities of the socialization process which make the experience of childhood for children far from a shared and universal experience and it was, I suggest, the absence of any empirical ethnographic work with children that enabled such a perspective to be sustained – and for so long.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIAL STUDY OF CHILDHOOD

Ethnography, then, has been critical to the development of a perspective on childhood which, in acknowledging its culturally constructed character, enables a view of children as social actors who take an active part in shaping the form that their own childhoods take. And perhaps nowhere is the value of this approach more demonstrable than within contemporary developmental psychology where, despite a long history of positivistic laboratory-based research and a commitment to childhood universals, ethnography is now appreciated for the insight which it can yield into the social aspects of children's development in particular cultural contexts. Dunn (1988), Dunn and Kendrick (1982) and Woodhead (1996, 1997) among others, now routinely employ ethnographic methods to further their social psychological work on child development and have been able to offer a radical critique of the homogeneous models of childhood which, hitherto, have dominated the psychological account. Dunn (1988), for example, combined observational and interview methods to produce an ethnographic account of young children's involvement in family life and their interaction with parents and siblings. She provides a ground-breaking account of their emotional and interpersonal relations. Similarly, through utilizing the more naturalistic method of interviews combined with detailed and close observation of children in their everyday lives at home and school in parts of the developing world, rather than conducting traditional psychological experiments with children in the laboratory, Woodhead offers evidence of the failure of traditional developmental psychology to acknowledge the cultural diversity of children's childhoods. His ethnographic-based approach recognizes that 'children do not grow up in a vacuum, nor do child care programmes function in isolation. Both are embedded in a dynamic social context of relationships, systems and cultural values' (1996: 10). Woodhead's work extends, therefore, the pioneering work of the culture and personality school to argue for the initiation of culturally sensitive child development programmes in developing contexts which are, what he terms, *paced* – that is, appropriate to the context of early development in any particular location.

Schieffelin's (1990) work on the language socialization of Kaluli children in Papua New Guinea is significant in this respect for she shows that what is regarded by Kaluli adults as necessary for children's language development is rather different from the view held by developmental sociolinguistics. Thus, during her lengthy period of fieldwork, when she was making her recordings and transcriptions of child–adult interactions or those that take place between children she would be told that certain exchanges were 'to no purpose' (1990: 30–2). However, in Schieffelin's view, they 'turned out to be rich in terms of displaying children's discourse and metalinguistics skills' (1990: 32). And it was through hearing such exchanges on a daily basis that she is able to argue that,

> in addition to an ethnographic view that considers what Kaluli say must occur for their children to talk and act like Kaluli, there is a complementary view from developmental sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics that suggests important developmental processes that should be examined in comparative perspective. (1990: 32)

The importance of this concern to identify what are regarded as culturally appropriate forms of child-rearing within a particular local context, and the importance of ethnography to this enterprise, is graphically demonstrated by the work of Briggs (1986). Her account of childhood among the Inuit reveals the very different views the Inuit hold concerning children's needs and interests.[7] Briggs' long engagement as a participant observer in Inuit society exposed her to a very particular and, for her, unusual form of adult–child interaction. Inuit adults play games with children which deliberately provoke, tease and frighten them. Such games, which might well be regarded as abusive within Western contexts, are, Briggs argues, one of the ways in which the Inuit encourage their children to develop an acute sensitivity to and awareness of the dangers of the external social and physical environment in which they are growing up.

One game described by Briggs was played with a small 3-year-old boy, Saila. Taking place within the immediate family but also involving a wider circle of neighbours and friends, the little boy becomes the butt of teasing, a teasing focused upon the potential loss of his penis:

Jona picked up a seal fetus, which was being used as a toy by his daughters. It was lying on the floor with a string around its neck. He brought the fetus towards [Saila's] penis and said: 'It's going to bite your penis'. Saila watched him with a stiff 'frightened' face. Other adults of both sexes and various ages came in to visit and entered the game, to a total of eight or nine. All of them poked their fingers into Saila's fly and pretended to pull his pants down. They pretended the fetus would bite and eat the penis. And they brought in Susi's puppy and pretended it too would bite and eat the penis. Susi and her four-year-old sister were told to do these things, too, and they did. (1986: 12–13)

Out of its cultural context this extract would seem to describe an episode of tormenting and sexual play between adults and children. In Briggs' opinion it is not; it is, in fact, just one of a series of legitimate educational games which adults play with their children. These games, which may teasingly threaten that a child's mother might die or tempt a child to risk his or her own life, Briggs argues, are the ways in which Inuit children are taught to be observant and cautious of the world around them. They are lessons for the future when, as adults, they must survive the precariousness of Inuit life.

Through ethnography, therefore, the possibility has at last been opened up of seeing children's life experiences as being contextualized by both the cultures and societies in which they live, as well as the biology which shapes their mental and physical development. Furthermore, what ethnography has achieved is a view of children themselves as active participants in, rather than simply subject to, the vagaries of these processes. Through their social interactions and engagement with their peers and adult care-takers ethnographic accounts have shown how children contribute to the shape and form which their own childhood takes. The next section indicates the range of such studies.

SOCIAL CHILDREN: 'DOING' ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

Pioneered during the 1970s by Hardman (1973) in her study of children's games and social relations in a school playground in Oxford, England, as noted above, ethnographic approaches are central to the new paradigm for the study of childhood (James and Prout, 1997). Ethnography, it is suggested, allows children to be seen as competent informants about and interpreters of their own lives and of the lives of others and is an approach to childhood research which can employ children's own accounts centrally within the analysis. Thus it is that contemporary social scientific accounts of children's social worlds are able to shed new light on many different aspects of children's lives through the presentation of those lives from the children's own perspectives. With

ethnography now the central methodology, research with children has extended beyond its traditional location in the school into other settings such as the hospital (Alderson, 1993; Bluebond-Langner, 1978), the club (James, 1986), the home (McNamee, 1998) and the community (Baker, 1998). It has also moved beyond the study of socialization and schooling to explore other aspects of children's lives: for example, how children learn to take on particular kinds of childhood identities among their peers (James, 1993); children's acquisition of health knowledge (Mayall,1996); children's understanding and experience of sickness (Christensen, 1999; Prout, 1987); the taking on of gendered and ethnic identities during childhood (Connolly, 1998); and the experience of work (Nieuwenhuys, 1994; Reynolds, 1996; Solberg, 1994) and that of play (Thorne, 1993).

Although much of this contemporary ethnographic work with children is largely concerned to explore children's everyday social lives – their games, their friendships and interactions with their peers, their participation in work, their health beliefs and attitude – an overarching interest in socialization remains central to many of these and other studies (see, for example, Schieffelin, 1990; Stafford, 1995). However, through the use of ethnography, its point of contemporary departure is radically changed. First, it assumes that an understanding of *how* children learn, not simply *what* they learn, is central to the comprehension of processes of cultural learning. A second, and closely linked assumption is that it is not sufficient simply to observe adults' behaviour towards children; it is important also to see children as social actors in their own right, to observe and understand what it is that children do with one another as well as with their adult care-takers and, most importantly, to canvass children's own views and opinions directly.

Such a perspective is explored by Corsaro (1997) in his account of socialization as a process of 'interpretive reproduction'. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork with children in both Italy and America Corsaro argues that children's cultural learning takes place, not as the linear progression advocated by traditional developmental psychology but, rather, as a collective process of reproduction:

children do not simply imitate or internalize the world around them.They strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and to participate in it. In attempting to make sense of the adult world, children come to *collectively produce* their own peer worlds and cultures. (1997: 24; emphasis in the original)

And it is through the detailed observation and recording of little children's everyday interactions and conversations with each other and with him that Corsaro is able to substantiate this claim. For example, in one of his early ethnographic studies of nursery school

children, Corsaro (1985) described in detail a sequence of behaviours which he observed and which, for him, illustrates part of the process whereby children collectively learn and reproduce the social rules and expectations of a given society. Two children, Richard and Barbara, have been building things and sitting near one another, although they have not spoken and do not appear to be playing together. However, when another child – Nancy – approaches, Richard says to Barbara 'We're friends right?' and they begin to coordinate their play activities to the exclusion of Nancy. Corsaro's later analysis of this sequence of behaviours places children's perspectives centrally as he endeavours to interpret their actions and words from the child's points of view:

> Resistance of access attempts seems uncooperative or selfish to adults, including parents and most teachers ... But it is not that the children are refusing to cooperate or are resisting the idea of sharing. In fact, as we see in this example, the defenders of the interactive space are often intensively involved in creating a sense of sharing during the *actual course of playing together* and often mark this discovery with references to affiliation ('We're friends, alright?'). In simple terms, the children *want to keep sharing what they are already sharing* and see others as a threat to the community they have established. (1997: 124)

James (1993) has a comparable example in her ethnographic study of nursery school children where a 4-year-old girl, playing on her own, attempts to draw a boy by-stander into her play:

> You're out of my house' she says to no one in particular as she brings plates and cups to a table. 'I haven't no peas in my house.' (To a boy standing watching): 'Will you look after my food? ... You're daddy right? Come on, hurry. You can have milk shake and I've got some peas. I know where they are ... lost them ... in the pink jug. Where's the milk jug because I need it?. No. We don't need it there. I gave it to dad and he was losing it. I'm going home.' (To the boy again:) 'You come to my house, dad, there's your hat.' (She gives him a straw hat). 'Go away.' (She pushes away another boy who attempts to join in). On another day, hanging around outside the Wendy House in the reception class and refused access by the girls for the third time, five-year old Saul reluctantly announced: 'I'll go off to work again.' (1993: 187)

Such examples of young children's early attempts at collective and shared social action clearly demonstrate that they have already learnt some of the rules of social engagement which are a prerequisite for membership in the social world. They are, however, very conventional and fleeting instances of social action and, as such, are not readily amenable to the processes of testing, questioning or recall upon which other kinds of research methodologies rely. In both instances, therefore, it can be argued that it was precisely the everyday and

ethnographic familiarity of the researcher with the context, and of the children with the researcher, which permitted these very commonplace occurrences, first, to be remarked and noted down in the flow and buzz of social action and, second, to be later interpreted as having a particular significance and meaning. As Geertz has observed:

> It is with the kind of material produced by long-term, mainly (though not exclusively) qualitative, highly participative, and almost obsessively fine-comb field study in confined contexts that the mega-concepts with which contemporary social science is afflicted ... can be given the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* them, but, what is more important, creatively and imginatively *with* them. (1973: 23)

The above examples amply illustrate the potential ethnography has for accessing what has often been regarded as the separate and secret world of childhood (Opie and Opie, [1959] 1977). However, in the proliferation of studies of childhood which has occurred during the past twenty years, there are some differences emerging concerning ways of carrying out ethnographic research with children (James et al., 1998). Notwithstanding that the appearance of these distinctions seems to affirm Hammersley's (1990) observation that it is increasingly difficult to assess what actually counts as 'ethnography', central to the social study of childhood remains the commitment to understanding the everyday social worlds of children as children do, and to seeing children as informed and engaged social actors. These twin perspectives provide a common and uniting thread between the various accounts and approaches which can now be found.

Many ethnographic studies of children's lives continue to employ traditional participant observation as a mainstay research technique for it is this which many regard as having the greatest potential to engage children actively with the research. However, there is variation as to exactly where emphasis is placed during the research process. In the school setting, for example, teacher–pupil interactions are often the focus for research, the intention being to explore the formal and informal educational processes at work during the school day (see King, 1978, 1984; Pollard, 1985; Walkerdine, 1985). Within this group of studies what constitutes participant observation varies extensively. Slukin (1981), for example, in researching children's play and games as an aspect of growing up in the playground, combined times for strict observation with those for conversation with the children about their play. King (1984), by contrast, adopted what he calls a non-participant observation approach. Finding it problematic that the nursery children regarded him as a teacher-surrogate, King's strategy was to be as unobtrusive as possible. By on occasion using the 'unoccupied Wendy House as a convenient hide',

he eventually achieved a situation where the children ignored his presence amongst them (1984: 123).

Others, however, have adopted a more fluid and conventional participatory approach, akin to that of an anthropologist working in another culture. Of some more recent fieldwork, for example, Pollard and Filer write:

> I was certainly viewed as being somewhat 'strange'. Here was an adult who was often at school, but who did not behave like a teacher, a parent, dinner supervisor or classroom assistant. He wandered around the classroom and the playground, watching activities, chatting with children and occasionally asking questions and recording their replies in his notebook. When asked what he was doing he would explain that he was, 'writing a story about what children think about school'. The children, with no other experience, accepted their pet researcher and joked about him. 'Was I a spy?' 'Was I Superman?' ... As in my previous research with pupils, I found that children loved to be listened to and have their views taken seriously. This, of course, was simple for me because, unlike their teachers and parents, I had no responsibility for the children and no position to protect. Whilst I was never required to 'tell them off', I could indulge the children simply by being interested in them. (1996: 294)

Barrie Thorne in her study of gender and childhood fleshes out in more detail what such an approach actually involves for the ethnographer in her account of doing participant observation in an American school:

> I set out to learn about gender in the context of kids' interactions with one another. I began to accompany fourth- and fifth-graders in their daily round of activities by stationing myself in the back of Miss Bailey's classroom, sitting on the scaled-down chairs and standing and walking around the edges, trying to grasp different vantage points. I was clearly not a full participant; I didn't have a regular desk and I watched and took notes, rather than doing classroom work. As the kids lined up, I watched and then walked alongside, often talking with them, as they moved between classroom, lunchroom, music room and library. At noontime I sat and ate with the fourth- and fifth-graders at their two crowded cafeteria tables, and I left with them when they headed for noontime recess on the playground. (1993: 13)

Using participant observation as an ethnographic research technique for studying children's lives, others have ventured outside the school setting. Indeed, Bluebond-Langner's (1978) study of children with leukemia is remarkable for its early insights, not only into the worlds of dying children, but for its recognition of the value ethnography has for working with children in the twin settings of the hospital and home. Bluebond-Langner spent nine months on the children's ward of a hospital in mid-west America and, during this time, not only carried out interviews with children but was able to participate in their lives as patients and also to visit them at home. During their long period of hospitalization she played with them, listened to their stories, comforted them and observed their interactions with their parents, with medical staff and with one another: 'Like a volunteer, and like most anthropologists in the field, I willingly did whatever they [the hospital staff] told me. I played with the children, helped with the meals, accompanied the children to various parts of the hospital, and assisted in procedures' (1978: 251).

Similarly, in her research into children's working lives in South India, Nieuwenhuys (1994) employed the traditional holistic ethnographic techniques of participant observation. For Nieuwenhuys this involved living for over a year in a small community in South India where she got to know the families and their children very well across a variety of different settings simply through living alongside them. However, it was the switch to systematic observation of children's work, a method which then slowly evolved into more participatory methods, which proved 'a crucial moment in the research' (1994: 33). And it was crucial in that it enabled her to begin to engage with the children as people in their own right whose opinions were to be valued:

> I found nevertheless support from the children whom I met while they were at work. They did not think it awkward that I should show some interest in what they did. The thought that I was interviewing them to write down what they said excited them. Some became spontaneously my informants, reporting to me all the news that used to go from mouth to mouth. A few even sought in me their patroness, asking me for small loans with which to start a business or for loans to buy the necessities for going to school. (1994: 5–6)

Reynolds (1989), in her study of children as healers, also confirms how it was participant observation techniques – 'playing, talking, walking, eating and working with the children both in their homes and outside' – for over a year, which allowed her to contextualize her understanding of 7-year-old black South Africans' view of the world (1989: 8; see also Reynolds, 1996).

In depicting the broad range of qualitative research on childhood currently being carried out, James, Jenks and Prout (1998) suggest that ethnographic research with children is beginning to embrace, as part of its method, different kinds of research techniques. These are designed to both engage children's interests and to exploit their particular talents and abilities. For example, what James et al. (1998) term 'task-centred activities' are research techniques adapted from those commonly used in development work for participatory rural appraisals. These techniques involve children in using media other than 'talk' – for example, drawing maps or pictures, filling in charts, grouping

objects together – to reveal in visual and concrete form their thoughts and ideas about a particular research question. They are now being used in qualitative research with children either as stand alone techniques in group work, in combination with qualitative interviewing, or as additional research tools during participant observation work with children (Christensen and James, 2000). O'Kane (2000), for example, describes how in a study of children's decision-making in relation to foster care placements in Britain such participative techniques permitted children to articulate their concern to be consulted about their present and future care.[8] As her work shows, their value and particular pertinence for childhood ethnography lies in their ability to provide researchers with a highly focused body of data around a discrete topic but, additionally and perhaps most importantly, they encourage children themselves to be reflexive about the outcomes of the data production process in which they are involved.

As part of her participant observation study of children's attitudes towards difference and disability, James (1993), for example, shows how the use of group story-telling led children to reflect on some of their own prejudices. The children were given the outline of a story about a child who had no friends and they then had to decide why this was the case and what he or she would have to do to make friends. In their stories, the 6–9-year-old children collectively agreed that it was children who looked different – ugly, dirty, fat children – and those who behaved anti-socially – those who stole, who fought, who swore – who would be children without friends. To gain friends a child would have to change their behaviour, a move which, the children decided, would be reflected in the child's changed, physical appearance. On two occasions this parallel change in the physical body was challenged by one member of the group. The first time was when a boy insisted that the girl in the story could not stop being ugly just because she was now good, a proposition which, once it had been articulated, led the other children to stop and reconsider. As James notes, 'eventually, and somewhat charily, they concluded that although she was still ugly, the girl's friends "don't care any more because she is good"' (1993: 132). On the second occasion a girl was described in the story as being friendless because she was in a wheelchair and could not run about. When trying to work out what then would happen if this girl were to try to make friends the group reached an impasse. James describes the discussion that ensued among the children:

> how could this situation be ameliorated? How could the girl's body be made to be the kind of body a girl with friends would have? They chose a magical resolution, a fairy-tale ending: the heroine fell out of her wheelchair and suddenly found that she could walk again. (1993: 132)

In the move towards greater reflexivity in the research process and, in particular, with regard to ethnographic practice, the use of such task-centred activities are a significant development in childhood research. Not only do they draw children in as research participants, thereby furthering the research dialogue, they also encourage childhood researchers to be reflexive: about the data that is produced by children and about what, as ethnographers, they will reproduce as a written and authoritative text about childhood (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986).

REFLECTIONS ON CHILDHOOD ETHNOGRAPHY

While ethnographic work with children may permit adults to see the world as a 7-year-old does, and thus is to be applauded, this new vision does carry with it an additional burden of responsibility. The first of these centres on the power relations between adult researcher and child informant. As noted by Pollard and Filer above, the researcher is, for example, often not regarded as a 'normal' kind of adult by the children and children may not therefore see the researcher as occupying an adult position of power (see Mayall, 2000). Recalling various pieces of fieldwork in schools, Corsaro, for example, depicts the way in which the simple difference of size between child and researcher has to be negotiated and a new status taken on in the ethnographic encounter:

> In my ethnographic research in preschools in the United States and Italy my goal is always to discover the children's perspectives, to see what it is like to be a child in the school. To do this I have to overcome the children's tendency to see me as a typical adult. A big problem is physical size; I am much bigger than the children. In my early work I found that a 'reactive' method of field entry into children's worlds works best. In simple terms I enter free play areas, sit down, and wait for the kids to react to me ... After a while the children begin to ask me questions, draw me into their activities and gradually define me as an atypical adult. Size is still a factor, however, and the children come to see me as a big kid, often referring to me as 'Big Bill' ... To the Italian children, as soon as I spoke in my fractured Italian I was peculiar, funny, and fascinating. I was not just an atypical adult but also an incompetent one – not just a big kid but sort of a big, dumb kid. (1997: 29)

But the researcher is not a child. She/he can always revert to their adult role, by choice or by circumstance. This is why the question of the researcher's role has become one of the central issues in research with children. Fundamentally, it engages with the vexed question of the power differentials that exist between the child and the adult researcher and various solutions to this dilemma have been proffered.

Mandell (1991), for instance, describes her status *vis-à-vis* her child subjects during her research as that of being 'least adult' and details how she accomplished this. Rejecting the research role of detached observer, Mandell opted for complete involvement, refusing the position of an authoritative adult in the children's world. She climbed into the sand pit and joined the children on the swings, arguing that through such participatory activities she was able to distance her adult self from the children. Others have questioned the validity and utility of such a stance. Fine and Sandstrom (1988), for example, argue that it is never possible for adults to 'pass unnoticed' in the company of children: age, size and authority always intervene, something which in fact Mandell also rather reluctantly notes. But asking in what circumstances these differences assume significance and importance, and when they are irrelevant, may tell us much about children's position in the social world. As Fine has observed: 'there is methodological value in maintaining the differences between sociologists and children – a feature of interaction that permits the researcher to behave in certain "non kid" ways – such as asking ignorant questions' (1988: 17). If, as Geertz (1983) argues, anthropologists do not have to turn native in order to argue from the natives' point of view, then it is clear also that childhood researchers need not pretend to be children. Indeed, as Mayall (2000) argues, the inevitable differences between children and ourselves have to be accepted. Only when it is openly acknowledged that, however friendly we are, adult researchers can only ever have a semi-participatory role in children's lives, can the power differentials which separate children from adults begin to be effectively addressed. In this sense ethnography is powerfully placed to initiate this process.

A second issue which arises in relation to childhood ethnography concerns the siting of the research itself. From the examples given throughout the chapter, it is clear, for instance, that the school is increasingly being used as an ethnographic setting for purposes other than the study of the education process *per se*: for research into children's social relations with their peers and/or adults, the acquisition of cultural knowledge, gender socialization etc. And, this really comes as no surprise: the structural features of the school system help constitute an ideal and ready-made cultural setting for the ethnographic study of childhood. However, this being so, it is all the more important that researchers continue to remain reflexive about the impact this setting has both for the process and the product of the ethnographic method. James et al. underline the importance of such a reflexive awareness:

> how often are reflections offered on the ways in which the school as a research site works to naturalise the model of the socially developing child within our studies? As an age-based institution which is hierarchically organized into age classes and shot through with particular power relations, might it not shape the form and style of the research process? To what extent, for example, are we led to design our research with the age stratification of the school in mind and what implications might this have for our research? Would findings about sexuality, gender, ethnicity, friendship, bullying, play and work, for example, look different if they had been gathered outside the context of the school or other child-specific, age-based institutions such as youth-clubs or day-care centres. (1998: 176)

A third and related issue concerns the question of access and informed consent for, it must be noted, that although perhaps providing easy ethnographic access to children the school does not automatically therefore guarantee children's research consent. The importance of this can be underlined by examples of research that engages children in the researcher's project in settings where access has proved more difficult. In these projects children are engaged as informants in semi-structured ethnographic interviews or as participants in focus groups or other kinds of group work and although such techniques represent a more formal and perhaps a more restrictive ethnographic methodology, what they do is to encourage researchers to be attentive to the issues of children's own consent.

Alderson's (1993) study of children's consent to surgery, for example, draws extensively on child interviews, setting these in the context of other qualitative ethnographic data gathered during weeks of observation carried out in the hospital by the research team. Children were directly asked if they wished to participate in the research and those who did gave their consent. The virtue of using semi-structured interviews with children, conducted in a quiet space either with children alone or in friendship groups, is that they can facilitate a more focused and private discussion than would be possible in the hustle and bustle of the everyday public life of the classroom or school yard and thereby help ensure children's informed participation. The interview may also prove especially useful for collecting data of a personal and sensitive kind such as children's experiences of divorce (Neale and Smart, 1998) or of being in foster care (O'Kane, 2000), where the necessity of establishing some parameters for informed consent would seem particularly critical.

In this respect the home is an important research site in childhood research precisely because it does not easily lend itself to the more fluid ethnographic techniques of participant observation, especially in Western urban contexts where the 'black box' of the family remains a largely privatized social space. Strangers (and researchers) enter by adult invitation only. Those interested to research children's lives at home are faced, then, with not only the more generalized difficulty of gaining access to such a protected sphere but also the fact that children do

not usually occupy positions of power within the domestic arena. Children can rarely act as the gatekeepers to family life. Those wishing to carry out research with children in their homes may, therefore, have to resort to using the more formal technique of the semi-structured interview.

Often, however, this is only possible with prior parental approval for the project and, even when this is obtained, children may be made marginal to the research process precisely because they occupy positions of relative powerlessness within the family. James (1993: 40–1), for example, describes how in the course of interviewing children and parents at home, it was the parents – often the mother – who took charge of the interview. She most often directed its course and signalled to her children when their participation was required. However, although children in such instances may often be powerless either to assent to or to refuse researchers' access to their lives at home, what the unstructured interview *can* achieve for children is the possibility for they themselves, rather than the researcher, to control and direct the ebb and flow of the conversation. Here, for example, a mother and daughter are discussing with the researcher what happened when Paula, the daughter, received specialist help for dyslexia:

> *Mother:* You recognize the letter and the sound it makes, and you slowly build it up. Now also they've got to learn the alphabet frontwards, backwards, from the middle, you name it.

> *Paula:* [*challengingly*] I didn't do that.

Although as James acknowledges in this particular instance the daughter ultimately failed in her challenge to assert the authority of her own account, the interview had provided her with at least the possibility of doing so. Similarly, Neale and Smart (1998: 20–7) describe how, when interviewing children about their experiences of divorce, not only did the children often decide where they should be interviewed and limit their parents' involvement, but they also used the occasion of the interview as a vehicle to talk through problems and issues which were of concern to them. Alderson's work, too, confirms the empowering role which the semi-structured interview can offer children whose position as minors may mean that their opinions and views are either not asked for or risk being reinterpreted if they conflict with those held by their adult care-takers. Sensitive to the ethical issues which her research about consent might raise for the children, and also aware that the interview did not constitute a therapeutic encounter, Alderson none the less shows its value both for the research and for the children themselves in offering a full and rounded picture of the child's perspective:

> semi-structured interviews offer people time to have second thoughts. This raises complications for analysis. The initial quick response could be the best guide to young people's conscious hopes about surgery. Their later thoughts might refer to less conscious hopes, or prompt new motives as they spoke. Simply by asking questions we started new ideas. (1993: 85)

Within settings where participant observation research is possible and access is not an obstacle, the relative powerlessness of children may be less visible and obvious. It becomes, therefore, an even more important issue for ethnographers to address: whether in schools, youth clubs or clinics, children may be vulnerable to the expectations from authoritative adults that they will participate in the research. They may not be able to opt out. Alternatively, as Nieuwenhuys (1994) relates, adults may not wish children to be involved and may place obstacles in their path. In the account of her fieldwork in India, Nieuwenhuys, for example, describes the difficulties she and her research assistant had in eliciting children as informants in a cultural milieu where children are regarded as having low social status:

> we had noticed that children felt uncomfortable speaking freely in front of me. Adults never failed to require from children to behave with respect and modesty towards me, forcing them to do so if need be. They felt that going into detail about a child's normal routine, was much too mundane a subject to talk about with a foreigner and ran contrary to general notions of etiquette. They would therefore make derisory comments or even scold children who attempted to answer my questions seriously. As it was impossible for me to speak to the children without their parents' interference, it finally was Mohanakumari, herself born and brought up in Pommkara, who took it upon herself to carry on the interviews in our home. I would afterwards discuss with her the interviews she had recorded and translated. (1994: 34)

In such instances, then, the semi-structured interview provides a ballast for children against demands set by the adult world and permits children to engage more freely with the research, to actively give their permission at any time and to choose to withdraw from participating in the project (Alderson, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Ethnography in all its guises has, therefore, proved critical to the social study of childhood. Its key strength as a method lies in the ways in which, through close attention to the everyday and familiar through which the social world is both created and sustained, it has enabled the voices of those who would otherwise be silent to be heard. The 'muteness' of children's voices, noted in the 1970s by Hardman, has been largely ended through the development of a paradigm for childhood research in which children themselves are regarded as key social actors, whose own views and perspectives are to be taken into account. Increasingly, they may also be working jointly with researchers in the

production of data about their own lives and the lives of those significant others with whom they engage (see Christensen and James, 2000). Through such examples of what Clifford and Marcus (1986) have called 'dialogical textual production', childhood ethnographies can be said, therefore, to be at the forefront of the experimental and poetic moment in ethnography's own history. It is in this sense, then, that ethnography has enabled the social study of childhood finally to come of age.

NOTES

1 In this respect it is significant that the majority of studies funded under the ESRC children 5–16 Research programme, which has an explicit policy agenda, employ qualitative research methods which might loosely be grouped together as 'ethnographic'.

2 It was in the work of Phillipe Aries (1962), a French historian, that the socially constructed character of childhood was first described through his assertion that in medieval society childhood did not exist. Though this claim has since been tempered by other historians, the main thrust of his argument remains: that although children have always existed the social institution of childhood through which the age status category of 'the child' gains its form has varied across time and in space. For a discussion of these issues see James et al., 1998.

3 Acknowledgement of the cultural relativity of childhood is problematic, however, for those concerned to implement such policies (see Boyden, 1997).

4 Taking this definition I would not, therefore, regard historical work on the social worlds of children as 'ethnographic work', although historians such as Hendrick have made a very significant contribution to the social study of childhood (see Hendrick, 1994, 1997) and, indeed, helped recover children's own perspectives from history (see Hendrick, 2000).

5 Raum (1940) provides a comprehensive overview of this body of work.

6 Mead's own work is exceptional in this respect for its early inclusion, albeit somewhat limited, of children's own views and verbal interactions with their peers and their parents (see also *Coming of Age in Samoa*, [1928] 1963).

7 See Woodhead, 1997 for a discussion of children's needs and interests, in which he argues against the possibility of a universal account.

8 For example, the diamond-ranking exercise asked children to evaluate which decisions about care were the most important for them; the pots and beans activity enabled children to evaluate how much say individuals involved in their care had over decisions taken about their lives.

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