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‘But I’ve never been asked!’ Research with children in Pakistan

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This paper provides some comparison and reflections based on the author’s involvement in two children related research studies in Pakistan, one of which was conducted in quantitative while the other in the qualitative–interpretive research tradition. The former might be useful in mapping and quantifying the demographics of certain groups of children and the extent of their problems; it is done from the adult perspective. The latter provided children greater ‘voice’ and ‘control’ over the research process by giving them the power to fix the terms of the researcher–participant interaction, which, let them express and maintain their individuality, autonomy and privacy in the Pakistani cultural context characterized by rigid hierarchies of age, gender and class among others. Such research ensures children’s rights to form opinions and express them in their preferred form and protect them against exploitation through research processes.

Keywords: quantitative; qualitative; research; children; Pakistan

Introduction

Human and social sciences have a long tradition of child-related research. Traditionally, this research has been carried out through the perspectives and understandings of adults who speak on behalf of children (Boyden and Ennew 1997). In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the realization that children have knowledge of their social worlds has led to new approaches to research (Christensen and James 2008).

Researchers have increasingly searched for ways of bringing children to the foreground of research related to their lives, giving rise to a new methodology of ‘children-centred’ research (Bessell 2009, p. 4). Christensen and James (2008, p. 2) have argued, that carrying out research with children does not necessarily entail adopting different methods, although, some research techniques might be considered to be more appropriate for use with children. However, such an approach may not address the power imbalances between adult researchers and child participants (Punch 2002a). For some, rather than methods, it is one’s ideological position towards children and childhood that is crucial (Cahill 2004, Grover 2004).

In this paper, I explore some epistemological and methodological questions that I faced during two separate studies with street children in Pakistan. The first, the Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children Study adopted what might be described as a rigid methodology, whereby the research was done *on* children. In the second study of the Street Children of Lahore I consciously moved

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away from this approach and sought to undertake research with children. Here, I aim to reflect critically on both projects, exploring the lessons that each has to offer.

Research with children in Pakistan

It is not easy to talk about 'the Pakistani child' in a society so diverse in terms of cultural heritage, social systems, regions, ethnicities and classes (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987). Amongst the four provinces and two federally administered tribal areas, The North Western Frontier province and the tribal areas are influenced by the central Asian culture, Baluchistan by Arab and Punjab and Sindh by the ancient sub-continent culture of Indus valley civilization. Each province has its own language with many more local dialects along with a national and an official language. While Punjab is industrialized and urbanized, Sindh is feudal and the NWFP and Baluchistan are tribal and religious conservative. Income and wealth inequalities are deep and wide spread and division along the class and caste is obvious. At the same time, one cannot miss the irony of a culture that has a horrendous record of child labour and yet is so loving, affectionate and indulgent to children (Lyon 2002). The age at which children cease to be indulged is partially dependent on the economic situation of the family. Very poor people, who make up one third of the population of Pakistan, tend to stop indulging their children at a relatively early age of 6–10 years (Lyon 2002). These children start playing important social and familial roles, including contribution to the earning capacity of the household (Usmani *et al.* 1993).

However, rich or poor, indulged or denied, children are not considered to have any degree of autonomy, they are minors, dependent on their parents or guardians, who can make all decisions related to children without even consulting them (Jillani 1989). This is in line with the patriarchal and hierarchical relationships of inequality at all levels of the Pakistani society in both public and private spheres, where there are mechanisms to instill notions of obedience to elders, particularly elder males (Lyon 2002). The existing norms reinforce the idea of the superiority of males (Weiss 1992). But even boys, who are highly valued from an early age, have little say in decisions affecting them (Government of Pakistan 2005). The social policies of successive national governments have considered child welfare and development to be investments in future economic growth rather than human rights of children (Government of Pakistan 2005). Within research, children tend to be the objects of study, with their own ideas rarely taken into account.

Historically, research on children in Pakistan has been carried out within the disciplines of psychology, medicine, social work and education. The body of research on children and childhood increased considerably during the 1990s as a result of international concern with child labour (for example Weiner and Noman 1995, Pakistan Federal Bureau of Statistics 1995, Government of the Punjab and ILO 1996, 1998, Government of Pakistan, ILO, IPEC 1996, 1998, SUDHAAR 1998, Jillani 1997, 1999, Jalalzai 2004 among others). However, in the late 1990s the need for deeper understanding of the wider social problems facing children – and for more research – was clearly demonstrated by the serial killings of one hundred children in the second largest city of the country, Lahore (DAWN 1999, Tufail 2005). The case became public when the serial killer sent his journal with record of his victims to a local daily newspaper. The government tried to hush the media, maintained a low key profile of the case and the killer was sentenced to death. However, during the investigation of the case, it became clear that police do not take reports of 'missing children' seriously, often do not file the official First Investigation Report and there was no other public agency to deal with the issue (Tufail 2005). The state's responsibility in implementing the UNCRC, child protection, juvenile justice, child trafficking, discrimination against girl children and the situation of street children all became the topics of research.

This research was either conducted or funded by inter-government, non-government and international development organizations. Data were collected within the framework of existing programs rather than drawing on discourses of childhood and/or child/hood theory. As Ennew (2003) has noted with reference to Africa, this approach to research with children is not uncommon. Although, Pakistan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990, rights-based approaches have not significantly influenced the design of government policy or government sponsored research. The UNCRC is widely considered to be 'a text originated from outside', as in many other developing countries (see for example Blanchet 1996). Moreover, few professional bodies and disciplinary research councils in Pakistan have either guidelines for research or research review committees. The Aga Khan University, Karachi, was the pioneer in establishing the University Research Council and the Ethical Review Committee in the late 1990s (Aga Khan University 2009). Some organizations followed this lead. However, there are no general or discipline-specific guidelines for research with children in Pakistan.

Against this backdrop, my first direct involvement with child-related research was the study of 'Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children' conducted by a team of researchers from the Social Work Department of the University of the Punjab for the Ministry of Social Welfare's provincial Commission for Child Welfare and Development (PCCWD) and UNICEF Pakistan. The study was part of the official response to the serial killing of children in Lahore in 1999, and one aspect of efforts to implement the UNCRC in the Punjab. Following this initial study, I undertook a second study with street children in Lahore from 2001 until 2005. The methodologies underpinning each of these studies differed markedly, and provide some insights into the importance of both methodology and method in research with children.

Research 'on' children – a study of lost, kidnapped and runaway children

The Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study, was conducted in 2000, funded by UNICEF Pakistan and undertaken by the Department of Social Work, University of the Punjab. Neither the Department nor the University had any guidelines or research review committee at that time to review the research proposal. I was one of a five-member team, each team member had a Master of Social Work and was a regular faculty member. The most experienced team member had worked extensively on child labour and non-formal education. Other team members had experience in teaching courses on children's issues and/or supervising masters-level research on children. None of the team had any formal education or training in childhood studies and we relied on existing literature, most of which was not local, media coverage, and our own 'common sense'.

The research was a survey of both institutionalized and non-institutionalized lost, kidnapped and runaway children in four district capital cities (Lahore, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi) of the province. These were the major categories of children who were victims of the serial killing. The definition of the child was taken from the UNCRC. The objectives of the study were to find the magnitude of the phenomenon of running away, being lost, and kidnapped; to ascertain the multiplicity of causative factors; to understand the response of different institutions; and to make appropriate recommendations to stakeholders for addressing the problem in the light of the UNCRC (Rehman *et al.* 2000). A detailed interviewing schedule with more closed- than open-ended questions was administered to 192 children from all three categories, in the four cities. Only male researchers interviewed children, because these children were mostly available at public places not frequented by females.

The decision for choosing these specific methods of study/data collection was based on the 'conventional wisdom' of the team members, which they had acquired as members of the larger Pakistani society and through studying and teaching standard research-method courses

as well as their own experience of social research. This wisdom guided our understanding both of children as minors and dependents and of research methods to be used with them. In short, it was after thorough consideration that these choices were made. On reflection, and with the benefit of hindsight, these choices were entirely adult-centred.

The entire phase of data collection was marked with suspicion and mistrust. With serial killings fresh in their minds, children did not trust the researchers. Despite proving their identity, children suspected them to be possible abductors or pedophiles. The children, especially runaways, were also fearful that the researchers would hand them over to police or agencies working for lost, kidnapped and runaway children, who, in turn, would force them to go home. Children were uneasy responding to a set of fixed questions, which did not necessarily relate to their situation and to which they did not wish to respond (Rehman *et al.* 2000).

The researchers knew about the importance of 'rapport', and made efforts to establish a connection with the children, but failed in many cases, due to the time-consuming nature of the process, the extreme mobility of many children, and the structured (often controlled) nature of their interaction with children. As the data were analyzed, inconsistencies emerged, particularly in response to questions relating to age, years of schooling, the length of time children had been away from their parents or families, and earnings and expenditure. Many of the questions on the interview schedule remained unanswered. Moreover, when children were willing to talk, it was up to the individual researcher whether and how he recorded the parts of the discussion that did not fall neatly under any of the structured questions. It was hard to draw any meaningful conclusions and make recommendations from this incomplete picture of the situation of the children.

Furthermore, it was difficult to know what credibility to assign to a study in which the children, neither trusted the 'knowers' (researchers) nor shared with them, but rather, responded only to what they thought the researchers wished to know (Beazley 1999). The study was also designed within a narrow framework, which did not prioritize children's views and experiences, so the data gathered provided a limited understanding of their lives. The limitations of the study reflected the terms of reference on it was based. While the terms of reference called for recommendations to take account of the guiding principles of the UNCRC, there was no requirement that the research itself be underpinned by such principles.

Research 'with' children: street children of Lahore

Despite these shortcomings, the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study was the first of its kind. As such, it was well received and provided some insights into a complex social phenomenon. My experiences in the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study caused me to reflect on how the process and findings might have been different had the objectives and methodology been different. In particular, I was concerned with how a children-centred approach would have resulted in different questions, tools for data collection, and, ultimately, findings. How might children's accounts of their experiences in their particular context have changed the practical recommendations? As Boyden and Ennew argue, being children-focussed (or children-centred) means 'bringing children into the foreground so that their lives can be as clearly seen as those of adults' (1997, p. 11). Children-centred research, especially, when conducted in their specific cultural context (Baker 1996, Boyden 1997, Beazley 1999, Punch 2002a) has the potential to inform and influence policy in the light of children's views and lived experiences (Bessell 2009).

In 2001, I decided to carry out a second study, with street children in Lahore, using a different methodology. The Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study served not only as the bases of my prior knowledge of these children (Torres 1996), it also influenced my ideological direction and methodological decisions concerning children-related research in future. I came to realize that

children are human beings, like adults, with dignity and worth and rights (UNCRC 1989), which makes them much more than mere objects of research. I started thinking in terms of children as worthy subjects of research in their own right (James and James 2001, p 26). I became critical of adult theorizing of childhood (Mayall 2000) and looked for ways to take into account children's own views and experiences (Boyden and Ennew 1997). In addition, I was highly conscious of the subordinate position of children in the broader Pakistani society, which put them in an increasingly vulnerable position in the adult-centred research process.

In April 2001, I commenced the study entitled *Street Children of Lahore*. I wanted to complete the picture and give value to the unheard voices of these children (Roberts 2008) in a way that our structured interview survey had been unable to do (Torres 1996). The methodological decisions that I took can best be explained with reference to the ideological position that I described above.

Defining street children as research 'subjects'/'participants'

The first such decision was definitional. The definition of the term 'street children' has been a topic of considerable debate amongst researchers, policy makers, development practitioners and social workers around the world (for detailed reviews of this debate see Glauser 1990, Phillips 1994, Connolly and Ennew 1996, Beazley 1999, Ennew 2003). During the *Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children* study, we struggled with the 'fluid' identities of the children and their gradual move to street life (Beazley 1999). For example, a child who was lost while visiting a shrine with his/her family in a nearby city, remained with runaway children on the streets and did not wish to return home is both lost and runaway. It was difficult to categorize children while recognizing their specific circumstances.

Moreover, the term 'street child' was not commonly used in Pakistan at that time, even though for almost all non-institutionalized children the street was a major point of reference. Rather than using the term street children to describe themselves, children used terms such as 'runaway', 'wanderer' (*awara* in the local language), 'homeless', 'working' or 'begging' children. For the purpose of the fieldwork, the definition I adopted was 'all children who work and/or live in streets for periods other than regular work hours, who are not in a regular contact, or have no contact, with their families, and are not in direct supervision of their family or legal guardians'. As qualifiers I chose 'time spent in the street, unattended/unsupervised by the legal guardians and quality of contact with the family', because these three emerged repeatedly in the profiles of children in the *Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children* study.

I fully realized that this was more a description of certain categories of children than a definition and was aware of its non-comprehensiveness in the light of the scholarly debates mentioned above. However, it was better than adopting definitions of street children from far off lands, in the sense that it was based on the (albeit partially known) local reality. In addition, this operational definition helped me to decide who to ask to participate in the study. The participants in my fieldwork included lost, abandoned and runaway children, as well as runaway children in the custody of either a state agency or an NGO working with street children for the purpose of reuniting them with their families. Working children were most visible in the streets of Lahore. Participants in my study included both those children who were sent by parents to work but gradually lost a regular contact with family, and children who have least or no contact with their family but were under the control and supervision of their employers. The final category of children I included was those who stay away from the street for a considerable time (in a shelter home, rented place or living with someone else) but eventually returns to street life.

Some children in all these groups, were involved in sexual activities and drug use as part of street life but were not identified by their peers and others as either sex workers (in local

language '*ganda*' means dirty or bad) or addicts called after the substance they use, either '*charsia*' (hashish) '*solutionia*' (glue). Children become addicted to hashish when they are used by drug dealers/traffickers as carriers, and turn to cheaper glue when cannot find hashish. Other categories of children were visible in the streets but not include in the study, such as children living on the pavement with their homeless families, gypsy and refugee children with their kin or tribes and working children with a regular contact with family among others. These all differed from the research participants considerably on the basis of time spent in the street, unattended and unsupervised by their legal guardians and the quality of contact with the family.

Methodological issues

The second decision was related to methodology and evolved through a process. My interest in methodology was initiated as a result of the methodological difficulties faced and lessons learnt during the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study. It was strengthened by my new-found ideological position, that children are worthy human beings who have a right to form and express their opinions. I was fully committed to the view that any research with children should be carried out with equality, insight and respect (Alderson 2008). The decision was practically facilitated by training opportunities in using qualitative research methods.

My fieldwork with street children of Lahore was qualitative in nature. There were several reasons for this. First, I realized that no method is inherently participatory or better suited to children. However, qualitative methods permit one to address power imbalances between adult researcher and child subject (Boyden and Ennew 1997) and to present children's perspectives in their own words (Beazley 1999). Second, they would serve triangulation and interpretive purposes (Sprague and Zimmerman 2004) for the quantitative data available through the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study.

Third, research with children, especially those living on street without any adult guidance and supervision, is highly sensitive given its intrusion in children's personal lives, including focus on illegal activities and behaviour that deviates from accepted social norms (Lee and Renzetti 1990). My experience with the Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children study convinced me that research methods in qualitative–interpretive tradition, such as participant observation and interactive interviews, are better suited to such sensitive research.

Fourth, qualitative research offers a variety of tools and techniques for data gathering, providing means of shaping the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants, building rapport and trust and facilitate follow-up questions and probing of responses (Carvalho and White 1997). Finally, I preferred qualitative–interpretive approaches because they challenge the positivistic assumption of 'objectivity' in scientific research, which has implications in terms of the nature of social reality and the relationship between the 'knower' (researcher) and the 'knowable' (subject, in this case the children). As Baker (1996) noted in her research with street children in Nepal, the authoritative stance of survey researchers and children's ready manipulation of the information. Qualitative–interpretive approaches are better equipped to take account of such issues.

Fieldwork strategy

Locale was not much of an issue while planning and starting my fieldwork. The Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study provided quite a clear map of the universe of street children in Lahore. They tend to cluster at three main places. First is the constellation of the city railway station, *Data Sahib* Shrine, bus-depot, *Minar e Pakistan* monument and park, historical Lahore Fort, city's red light area, and fresh fruit and vegetable market. Second is the *Laxmi*

chowk – an old commercial area with small businesses adjacent to the central business district of the city. The third locale is the *Shah Noor* Film studios, which is in a part of the city, in extreme opposite direction to the first.

There were no formal approvals to be obtained or research board reviews to be considered (Morrow and Richards 1996, Dickson-Swift *et al.* 2008) as no such mechanisms were in place in the country at that time. However, adult gatekeepers who regularly came into contact with street children, including police, government and non-government social welfare agencies, shrine administrators, transport authorities and representatives of the market committees, were informed of the study (Burgess 1991, pp. 47–48). Their co-operation was requested and, in most cases, given in writing.

During 2001 (April–September), I conducted four observation sessions and three detailed interviews with key informants, including one street youth/stall holder in the railway station area, one social welfare officer and one police officer. Conversations and in-depth, interactive interviews were held with 14 children. During 2002 (October–November), detailed interviews with 10 children were recorded. I was abroad during 2003 and 2004. When I returned to Pakistan, I resumed the study, aiming to explore the changes in the lives of street children in Lahore, as the topic of ‘street children’ had, in the words of Tobias Hecht (1998), become ‘sexy’, ‘less controversial’ and fashionable in Pakistan by that time. During 2005 (February to May), two observation sessions were held. Two key informant interviews (with a social welfare officer, and a street youth) and six interviews with children were recorded. In all, six observation sessions were held, five key informant interviewed and 30 detailed/interactive interviews with street children recorded.

Over the course of the fieldwork I met and talked to almost 100 children, 10–14 years of age, almost all male. One child, with whom I interacted both as an individual and in a group during the first phase of the fieldwork, was six years old. Two were 17 and 18 years of age. I met only one female street youth, who, most of the time, stayed at the *Data Sahib* shrine as a *Majaver* (devotee attendant). In Pakistan, there are not many girls among street children, for reasons including the cultural conceptions of women as belonging to the private sphere and being bearer of family honour, as well as their restricted mobility and immediate danger of harassment and sexual abuse when out on their own (Beazley 1999, Rehman *et al.* 2000, Ali *et al.* 2004, Tufail 2005). However, it is not known whether girls are less visible on the streets in Lahore, Pakistan or they are actually less in number as compared to the boys.

While interviewing the children, formal, written ‘consent forms’ were not used, but I did explain to every participant during the initial contact(s) who I was, what I was doing, and their rights to participate and to stop participating in the fieldwork any time and without telling me the reason for doing so. Some of these contacts lasted for quite a while and discussions with children were long and intimate at times. Many children, especially during 2001–2002 when memories of the serial killings had not yet faded, were reluctant to be part of the fieldwork formally and have their conversations be recorded (on tape or paper). They did, however, want to be listened to and to share their stories.

I honoured their wishes, not only as an ethical obligation as the researcher but also as a right of those children to decide for themselves (Boyden and Ennew 1997). This led me to make the difficult decision of leaving a wealth of information out of any documentation (Hecht 1998). Nevertheless, that information no doubt helped me understand and work with street children in a more appropriate manner as I gained their trust and enjoyed a sound relationship based on some equality.

As I discussed earlier, the decisions regarding use of specific methods, tools and techniques evolved during the process of research. I started with a check list for observation and in-depth interviews. However, almost completely abandoned it as the complexity and variety of the life of street children unfolded. I started with unobtrusive observation for two reasons.

First, to become a 'familiar figure, for whom the children did not behave in special ways' (Mayall 2008, p. 111). Second, acceptance in general was a major issue in conservative and traditional Pakistani society, where women's place is not in the public but the private sphere (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987, Dua 2002, Gupta 2002). It was particularly difficult for a young, educated, seemingly middle-class woman (later known to be unmarried too) to be present, let alone talking to men, in public places (Dua 2002) such as bus-depots, railway stations, parks and shrines.

My initial attempts to make small talk with children and to blend into their social world (Thorne 1993 cited in Mayall 2008) were crucial in helping the children to accept me. The word spread quickly that I was a 'kind of teacher or student, doing university stuff which has something to do with children' who presented no potential risk. Interestingly, the children were reassured by the fact that I did not ask questions from the 'book' – referring to the folder in which researchers kept the interview schedule during the Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children study, but just talked about 'little things of no consequence'. The children's perception was confirmed by my contact with key informants including street youth, shop keepers/stall holders, and shrine attendants. I kept my contact with police and workers of welfare agencies to a low profile as street children of Lahore are highly suspicious of these official figures.

Gradually, with a conscious effort to adopt the 'least-adult role' (Mandell 1991), I became more of a 'participant observer' rather than a detached, unobtrusive one (Hecht 1998). Kite flying and kite running is a favorite pastime of street children in Lahore (Rehman *et al.* 2000), and became the first point of direct interaction with the children. As a female, it was not appropriate for me to fly or run kites, but I showed a keen interest in the technicalities of the sport, the number of kites run each day by individual children, and the kite-flying competitions among them. When children were not flying or running kites, I would simply 'hang out' with them, sitting in the shade in the park or in shrine trying to gain their trust (Beazley 1999) and developing rapport (Punch 2002a).

Food was an important means of attracting, building trust and engaging with the children (Baker 1996). I would share food with whatever children were around, and over time the children began to feel comfortable in joining me. Participant observation also let me become familiar with children's own spaces (Punch 2002a). They took me to visit places (such as parks, historical monuments, shrines and markets) that they mentioned repeatedly in their conversations with me, but which I had never been to. I wanted to see those places as much as the children wanted to show me, and visiting them together helped me to better understand the children's lives and the city in which they lived through their own eyes and mental maps (Beazley 1999, Hess-Biber and Leavy 2004).

While hanging out with groups of children, I also tried some Participatory Rural/Rapid Appraisal (PRA/RRA) techniques such as mapping, diagrams and time-flow charts to let the children identify and define the relevant issues (Baker 1996, Punch 2002a), but not with great success. Children were more interested in talking rather than mapping and/or drawing. There are a range of possible explanations for this. It may have been that these children simply liked to talk (Blanchet 1996, Mayall 2008), or that most had never been to school (Rehman *et al.* 2000) and were not familiar with or interested in marker pens, drawing sheets and colorful thumb pins. It may have been that because the children were constantly on the move (Baker 1996, De Oliveira 2000, Rehman *et al.* 2000); they rarely sat in one place for an hour or more. Or it may have been my own lack of experience, for while I had used PRA techniques with adult communities I had not used them with children.

As our interactions deepened and greater rapport was established, children were more willing to talk and share with me. These were group conversations rather than focus group discussions in any true sense of the term, as I did not try to introduce a topic nor to steer discussion in any

particular direction (Mayall 2008). It was children who chose the topics of conversation and, in some cases, just started chatting and gossiping. I did try to probe into some issues in the group conversations and would follow-up with individual children if something new or interesting arose (Beazley 1999). I did consider organizing focus group discussions, but decided not to when I observed that there was a clear difference in the way children talked and behaved in a group and in one-to-one talks. For example, younger children almost always looked to older children for direction and approval (Hecht 1998). However, during in-depth/interactive interviews, the children were more forthcoming.

How did the strategy work?

An important aim of my methodology was to give children 'voice' and some 'control' over the research process, by giving them the power to fix the terms of our interaction (Corbin and Morse 2003). When children were first invited to participate in the research, I explained to each the background, nature and purpose of my study and informed oral consent was sought (Boyden and Ennew 1997). I did not seek written consent from children as many could not read or write and others did not want to sign any piece of paper, even if they could read and understand it. This is a common fear in Pakistani society, where more than half the adult population is illiterate and signing a piece of paper is an important issue, which is associated with legal necessity and with negative consequences for the signatory (Rehman *et al.* 2000). I assured children of confidentiality and they chose whether they wished to have interviews recorded in writing or on tape or not at all.

Research methods were important in giving children some control. Many researchers suggest that qualitative techniques, such as mapping, allow child participants to share the structure of their world as they see it, thus deepening a researcher's understanding (Baker 1996, Beazley 1999, Punch 2002a). Through the children's maps, I developed a holistic view of their world, which focused around shrines from where they could get free food and shelter at times of economic hardship, railway stations where old and new street children meet, and historical monuments in the city where they spend their leisure time and get occasional work. These places were geographically scattered all over the city, in an area of 128 square miles occupied by some seven million people.

Children who participated in the study had the opportunity to determine the type of interview, one-on-one or in a group for example, and the location. These interviews do not fit neatly in any one type of interviews. Some were one-off, others prolonged over a couple of meetings in a week or fortnight (Dickson-Swift *et al.* 2008). Some were conducted in as free an atmosphere as children wished and I could provide. In these situations, children had considerable control, and at times initiated interviews and discussions themselves, talked more freely and shared personal thoughts and experiences (Punch 2002b). They took pride in being asked to participate in research – a serious grown-ups' business, and felt that they are 'important' and 'responsible' people making decisions which usually adults make for them (Baker 1996). My fieldnotes are full of comments such as, 'I have never been asked before', 'I always wanted to tell ...' and 'you don't think I am stupid [as a child], do you?'

However, the unequal power relations characterizing the larger Pakistani society were almost always at work during the research (Lyon 2002). For example, it was difficult to give children any control, when they were temporarily held by the social welfare agencies. The staff of these agencies kept instructing the children how to behave and respond to me, even when they were not sitting in on the interview. It was also difficult to give children a sense of control when employers, peers, elders or gang leaders were in the vicinity. Children were unsure as to what these elders would approve of and be pleased with when they responded to me, and how much to share with me (Baker 1996). They were dependent on these adults for their survival on the streets.

My age and status as an educated and independent adult was another, different kind of power imbalance in the research process (Boyden and Ennew 1997). Comments such as 'You do listen to us', 'I know I can tell you my secret', 'You are not like all other adults, fussing around with us all the time as to what to do and what not to do' occur in my field notes, reflecting the nature of relationship that I had with children. However, children considered me 'powerful' and/or 'superior' if only in age and social status, addressed me as *baji* – a title of respect for an older sister (Lyon 2002) and asked me for advice on matters of importance to them.

Similarly, gender hierarchies embedded in Pakistani culture were a source of continuous confusion in regard to my relationship with the participant children. My status as female meant that children, particularly boys, perceived me as less powerful and less of a threat than an adult male researcher (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987, Weiss 1992, Lyon 2002). In the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway study, when male researchers first made contact, children took them to be police informers, representatives of social welfare agencies and/or pedophiles. On the other hand, because I am female, the male children were reluctant to discuss with me, or in my presence, issues such as violence, drugs and sex – all of which are considered 'men's stuff'. This was similar to Baker's (1996) experience of gender constraints in talking to street children in Nepal about their sexual health (see also Veena Dua 2000).

Class is another important building block of Pakistani society (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987) and operated at two levels in this research. In general, when Pakistanis meet, they weigh up the status (in terms of socio-economic class) of the person in front of them and behave accordingly (Lyon 2002). Part of my identity and acceptance in the social world of children was based on the perception of me as an educated, professional, middle-class young woman. The gatekeepers, key informants and children would not have accepted somebody, especially a woman, from a background similar to their (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987). More specifically, the concept of class was at work in the research process in terms of children themselves as a class in themselves, versus adults as a class. As mentioned elsewhere, Pakistani children are socialized to obey their elders. So, it took long before the participants of the Lahore study could start believing that they (and not their employers, gang leaders or the researcher) are the ultimate decision makers with regard to the nature, extent and mode of their participation in the research and to take control of the process where possible. The research methods of participant observation and group discussions were particularly helpful in this regard.

Despite all these issues, I felt that the children were able to contribute far more in my study of Street Children of Lahore, when compared to the earlier study of Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children. The Lahore study provided insights that were missed in the earlier study. As an example, according to much of the international literature (Phillips 1994, Torres 1996, Hecht 1998, De Oliveira 2000) street children frequent shopping malls, yet in the Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children study we did not find any street children in malls. Through the second study, I came to know that street children of Lahore prefer traditional fruit and vegetable markets over big, fashionable malls, where their dirty appearance makes them easily identified by police and social welfare agencies. Such insights are essential to understanding the social worlds of street children.

Reflecting and learning lessons

The different methodologies used in the two studies outlined here provided an opportunity to reflect on the relative merits of each in terms of research 'with' children.

Four key concepts are identified by Beazley *et al.* (2006, pp. 21–22) as underlying a rights-based approach to research with children. First, children's right to express their views on matters affecting them (article 12 of the UNCRC). Second, their right to freedom of expression in forms of their own choosing (article 13). Third, children's right to high quality services (article 3.3) and

finally, children's right to protection from all forms of exploitation (article 36) including exploitation through research processes (Ennew and Plateau 2004).

Children's right to express their views was not a principle underpinning the Lost, Kidnapped and Runaway Children study. The study was constructed on the basis of an adultist view of children and childhood, which provided no scope for children to influence the direction of the research. Children who had been involved in that study described the rigid, closed questions as coming 'from the book'.

The consequences were three-fold. First, children's experience of research was not a positive one and they felt no ownership, control or even engagement as the survey research method reinforced adult power (Boyden and Ennew 1997). Second, it was insensitive and exploitative in that it did not take into account the relative lack of power of such a disadvantaged group of children and made no effort to use such methods which might address the issue and bring in children's perspectives (Baker 1996, Punch 2002a). Third, our insights into children's lives and our ability to make policy recommendations, was limited by the rigid structure of the methods used (Baker 1996). The more interactive and participatory approach used in the study of the Street Children of Lahore allowed the diversity and complexity of street children's lives to unfold gradually during participant observations and interaction with children. Only then, was I able to see children's world and understand their perspectives on such issues as their decision to remain in exploitative and abusive relationship with their employers rather than seeking help from welfare agencies, which would, in turn, send them home.

There are, nevertheless, limitations on the extent to which children can exercise their right to express their views, and in their own way, in a society that is based on rigid hierarchies of age, gender and class as discussed earlier. The issue of using appropriate research methods is central to the children's right to express themselves in their preferred form. The rigid methodology and structured interviewing schedule used in the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study did not offer children any choice. As a result, the data that we obtained were incomplete, inconsistent and divorced from context in some instances (Baker 1996). However, in the Lahore study, children felt esteemed, which gave them confidence to exercise due control in decisions regarding research methods. They choose to show me places rather than sitting and chatting. They choose to talk rather than draw or map, and they decided the form, place and level of interaction in interviews. I got better understanding of the lives of these disadvantaged children due to the fact that they were interested and active participants in the research process (Punch 2002a).

Two concepts of children's right to protection from all forms of exploitation including exploitative research processes and the right to quality services emerge together, somewhat interdependently, in both studies. First of all, questions emerged around children's object/subject status in the research. In the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway children study, children's formal consent was not sought. Although it was not required (as there were no ethical guidelines with such a requirement) it also never occurred to the research team that children should have a right to be asked and to say 'No'. Those who were on the streets on their own could at least refuse or avoid the researchers altogether. But, the institutionalized children could not even think of doing so as they were instructed to respond by the staff.

In the Lahore study, a similar situation emerged when I requested children in custody (of Police/welfare agency) to participate, or conducted interviews with peers and/or employers around. Although, I obtained informed oral consent and children were aware of their right to withdraw from the process at any time, there were points at which children were reluctant to talk and unsure whether or not to continue the process. Both these situations were exploitive as researchers did not take in to account children's vulnerability and lack of power (Lansdown cited in Morrow and Richards 1996).

This compromised status has further consequences for the research as a quality product/service to children in terms of understanding and recommending solutions to their problems.

This fact was fully realized in the Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway children study while proposing recommendations and intervention strategies to deal with the issue. It also has direct consequences for children in terms of costs and benefits of their participation. In the Lahore study, children's participation in the research can be considered a useful experience for children, because it gave them some sense of integrity, individuality, autonomy and control over the process (Weithorn and Scherer 1994), which is completely missing from the lost, Kidnapped, Runaway Children study. However, this has a downside in letting children in-depth interviews revisit painful memories of negative experiences (Morrow and Richards 1996).

In addition, I was faced with the ethical dilemma of learning in-depth about street children's lives, including the risks and dangers they face daily, and not being able to help them out of it (Boyden and Ennew 1997, Beazley 1999). There are no mandatory reporting mechanisms in place in Pakistan. Also, none of the participating children asked me for help. However, I find this situation somehow unsettling in terms both of children's right to protection from exploitation and the right to quality services.

Conclusion

We adults including the state, the larger community, parents, policy makers/practitioners and researchers have to take children's perspectives and life experiences seriously, if we acknowledge that children are worthy human beings and bearers of rights. What do rights or the UNCRC or constitutional provisions or any legislation for that purpose have to do with the realities of the lives of many children who find an exploitative agreement with an employer as their only guarantee of a life free from state intervention? What do state or non-state agencies have to offer to these children, when they do not even know about their circumstances back home and in the streets? We need more information about children, especially disadvantaged children, and better understanding of their lives from their perspectives, to supplement ours, to respect children's worth and dignity and to comply with the provisions of the UNCRC.

Quality research is one important means towards this end. In research terms, children present a special challenge with regard to the relatively greater adult power over them and different communication skills and levels. These challenges become acute with reference to disadvantaged children, such as street children, in non-egalitarian societies like Pakistan. Therefore, quality research *with* children, first and foremost depends on the researcher's own understanding and ideological position towards children's status and rights as members of the larger human society. This influences the choice of methodologies and methods to be used in research with children. While traditional researcher-led, quantitative, rigid methodologies and methods are helpful in mapping and quantifying the demographics of certain groups of children and the extent of their problems, they do so from an adult perspective. Children are considered mere objects of study, information thus gained is divorced from context and recommendations for their wellbeing do not take into account their own experiences of life's problems. The Lost, Kidnapped, Runaway children study demonstrated this fully.

However, researchers, who consider children as rights bearers, and worthy subjects of research in their own right, look beyond traditional research methodologies and methods in conducting research with children. The qualitative–interpretive tradition offers an alternative by providing participants with greater 'voice' and 'control' over the research process, by giving them the power to fix the terms of researcher–participant interaction. In the Lahore study, children could express and maintain their individuality, autonomy and privacy by making and implementing various decisions. These decisions included whether to participate in the research, how much to participate and when to withdraw. They also included children's exercise of choice over the methods used, for example, their preference for talking over drawing/mapping and taking me with them to visit places they frequented to let me know their world.

All this not only broadened my understanding of the lives of street children and enriched my data and analysis; it also made the research experience useful for children. It was empowering for them in that they could make choices and negotiate priorities *vis-à-vis* adults (researchers). However, the process brought home to me the realization that children-centred research requires clear ethical guidelines and standards. These guidelines are not mandatory in many parts of the world, not even outlined in some countries such as Pakistan, and there is no international monitoring body. This cannot be left to the individual researcher's discretion, especially since research subjects (children) are relatively powerless compared to the researchers (adults).

In addition, the UNCRC provides children the right to protection from all forms of exploitation including exploitation through research, which is itself a powerful tool (of producing knowledge and influencing policy) in the hands of adults, all the states parties should put such guidelines in place. This will be a step towards realizing the vision of the UNCRC worldwide. It will be even more significant for some disadvantaged children such as street children in Pakistan, who are doubly exploited at the moment, first because of their disadvantaged position in the larger society, secondly, because of the insensitive, exploitative research methods used to understand their situation.

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