Knowing Daily Lives of Children and Youth Working on the Streets through Photo-elicitation

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Abstract

   Research with children and youth is complicated as one has to face the challenge of unequal power relations between researcher, children and youth. This ethnographic research was carried out with fourteen boys working on the streets aged 12-16. These boys belong to two different ethnic groups, the Afghan and Pathan, and reside in Rawalpindi city. In this research, different qualitative tools and techniques were used but mainly photo-elicitation was used to get an in-depth understanding of young people's daily lives . It was found that photo-elicitation technique helped to create fun and learning among the key informants on the one hand and provided major research insights on the other. It is concluded that photo-elicitation gave opportunity to boys to express innovatively, a process which not only empowered them but also gave them a chance to think critically and raise their voices.
Keywords: Working children and youth; qualitative research; photo-elicitation.

Introduction

   Many researchers have acknowledged the multiple challenges of researching with and about children and youth (Darbyshire, Mcdougall & Schiller, 2005). There are not only ethical difficulties, primarily founded in the unequal power relationships between adult researchers and children and youth, but also difficulties lie with the fact that children may become bored, may see little purpose or gain to them in assisting researchers, or even resent them for taking up important working or leisure time. Such difficulties are exacerbated if the research is seeking to understand the lives of marginal groups such as street children, immigrant or minority children, especially in developing countries such as Pakistan. In the face of the rapid growth of street children across the world, many researchers have explored the roles and rights of street children and factors which limit their access to education and better living and leisure conditions. Despite all of the difficulties and ethical challenges, it is of rising importance to begin to assist children to regain their human rights through research with them. As a result, this paper sought to understand children and youth working on the streets in urban Pakistan in order to provide insights for government and other support organisations in developing effective programmes and services.

   This paper has two primary objectives. First, it considers photo-elicitation as a method to understand the lives of the Afghan and Pathan children and youth working on the streets ethnographically to explore their agency. In this paper it is explored whether working children and youth are agentic social beings (Oswell, 2013, p. 41). How they express their agency and what are their main interests and concerns in their daily lives. The second objective is to seek empowerment of children and youth by putting them in charge of research about their lives. It discusses the child-adult power relationship in research. In this, the importance and value of rapport building in the process of research on and with children is also discussed. Through photo-elicitation, the boys, who participated in this research

offered important insights into their daily lives. This research is unique in the sense that photo elicitation, a recognised research technique, has been used with children and youth working on the streets in Pakistan for the first time. Taking this gap as an opportunity, this research draws on this technique in enriching understanding of the lives of the Afghan and Pathan working children and youth (boys), aged 12-16. It is important to make it clear that this group is different from street children (who are defined in the literature) who work and live on the streets. This study group works on the streets for almost six to seven hours and live with their parents and families. They have filial responsibilities other than financial and involve in many other tasks including attending different schools and drop in centres, running errands, fetching water, cleaning houses, among other things. Photo-elicitation is discussed in coming section of this article.

Conceptual Framework

In order to explore the daily lives of street children in a way which is not only supportive but also generates the most data, it is essential to have some understanding of children. One such means of attaining perspicacity is to be found in the 'new' sociology of childhood by James and Prout (1997) which presents the case of children as *social agents* whose social relations are important to study in their own right (p. 8). That is rather than objectifying the children, recognising they have their own agency from the start of research. Importantly, this perspective is also supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) especially Article 12. Article 12 specifically says that:
When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account (UNCRC, 1989).

Such assumptions highlight young people's participation rights and the need to involve them not only in research, but also in those activities and policies which affect them. This article promotes the notion of children and youth as autonomous beings and active citizens, who should be involved, informed, consulted and listened to (see Morrow, 2001). Thus from this perspective, children and youth should be heard and not merely judged as subordinate or irrational. In this way, children's and youth's voices can become part of the decision-making rather than relying wholly on adults' opinions.

Such demands in turn raise the issue of how researchers might approach the children. In discussing research with children, Morrow and Richards (1996) found that the main challenge was the unequal power relationship between a researcher and a child (see for example, Tisdall et al., 2009). These scholars also identified many ethical issues related to the research relationship between researcher and children and youth. It is to mention here that this research technique was used at the end of the research - after 4 months of ethnographic fieldwork – where most of the time was consumed to build a rapport with children and youth. During the rapport building, I met those boys who took part in this technique almost on the weekly basis, visited their work places, met their families and moved with them on the streets. During rapport building process – which was time consuming and involved a lot of effort – different experience sharing was done by the boys which was not possible in other research techniques such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation, used in this research.

Research Setting and Sample

This ethnographic research was done in Rawalpindi city in Pakistan for seven months in 2012. Rawalpindi city is located in the northern most part of the Punjab province of Pakistan. The Australian University's Research Ethics Committee (where the researcher was pursuing her PhD) put many restrictions with regards to ethics and access to the key respondents including that young people would be accessed only through different

government aid organisations who were providing different services to these young people in Rawalpindi city. The studied Afghan and Pathan children and youth were between the age of 12-16, living with their families and belonging to the poorest stratum of society. They were involved in different work activities on the streets. These activities included rag picking, work in fruit and vegetable market, selling different items on the streets, shoe polishing, and a variety of work roles in restaurants, hotels and in automobile workshops.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used as these two sampling techniques provided the required and best information to achieve the objectives of this research study (Ali et al., 2004). In total, fourteen boys working on the streets comprised the sample for this photo elicitation study. The analysis of data was a complete process and was based on immersion in the data. In this process, I have found the patterns of ideas of what participants showed to me through their photos and how they have explained them to me. This process generated descriptions of the setting and experiences of the Afghan and Pathan children and youth working on the streets. This also included themes for analysis presented in this article (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). Codes and categories were sorted, compared and contrasted until saturated (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These themes became the major findings of this research paper. It must be mentioned here that the children were engaged in the review and analysis of photos through repeated interviews and group discussions. It was important to involve children in review and analysis so that they could check that their voices had been well-represented and the emergent themes were their opinions and voices, not the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

In this study, ethics clearance was obtained through an Australian University's Research Ethics Committee. Information was given to the young participants about the tasks they would be asked to undertake. A complete information sheet about the research was provided to parents and staff, and their concerns and wishes were addressed in the rare cases where they raised concerns. It was ensured that the children's and youth's participation in this research was wholly voluntary as discussed by Corsaro and Molinari (2000). It was explained clearly that they could leave the research at any time without informing the researcher without fear of questions. After they had been approached, time was given to them to think about their participation in this research. In some cases, some boys took only a few days to reply while others took a week or more. It was emphasised to all that they were free to join the research, and that they would not be pressurized by the support organisation's staff or the researcher. In addition to this, consent was taken from boys who participated in this research that their produced photos and discussion would be used for presentations and research publications. To maintain their confidentiality, boys chose their own pseudonyms in the beginning of the research and their taken pictures were blurred.

Photo-elicitation

In recent years, visual sociology has been used increasingly and to considerable effect in research with children and youth (Smith, Gidlow & Steel, 2012; Clark, 2010; Pink, 2011; Hartel & Thomson 2011; Pyle, 2013; Leonard & McKnight, 2014). Visual sociology is grounded in the idea that valid scientific insight in society can be acquired by observing, analysing and theorising its visual manifestation: behaviour of people and material products of culture (Pauwels, 2010). There are two ways of integrating photographs into the research account. According to Leonard and McKnight (2014), at the first place, the researcher can use the existing photographs or photographs taken by the researcher to understand a specific living situation of the studied group. Secondly, the participants of the study can take photographs and explain the meanings and contexts to the researcher in semi-structured interviews (Leonard & McKnight, 2014, p. 3; Pyle, 2013, p. 1547). Photo-elicitation is another aspect of visual sociology (visual studies) which gives an opportunity to the children

and youth to present their views other than simply through interviews and or discussion as in many other methodologies. For this article, we took photo-elicitation as a preferred techniques as it is termed as 'respondent-generated imagery' which is more reflexive and analytical (Pauwels, 2010), as compared to Leonard and McKnight (2014) who took the photographs and discussed them with the research participants. There are scholars who have worked with marginalized youth (see for example, Oh, 2012; Haw, 2008; Liebenberg, Ungar & Theron, 2013), although, the use of photo elicitation is a rarely used technique in studies *on* or *with* street children and youth to know their daily lives (Young & Barrett, 2001; Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi, 2013).

A total of fourteen boys volunteered to take this opportunity and present their views and share their thoughts through photographs. Each boy was asked to take 10 pictures of things which were of interest to him. It was demonstrated how to take pictures from the camera, and then were asked to show to the researcher to make sure that they understood the process of taking pictures. Once that task was completed, they were asked to hand the camera to the other boys. This was based on an ideal process where 3 boys would share one camera with an expected outcome of about 30 pictures taken over two to three weeks.

Through photo elicitation, the Afghan and Pathan boys, who were shy and were less participative in interviews, could feel more relaxed and could represent themselves independently and with more of a focus. For example, a boy said:

> Using camera to express my life is very interesting. I found it very innovative as I never used it before. I always thought that research is quite boring in which the researcher asks questions and you simply answer them. But in this research, through this exercise I was able to express myself in a different way and I also controlled the process as I took pictures of those things which I wanted to show (Jahangir Khan, aged 15).

Through this technique of qualitative research, the challenge of a heavily unequal power relationship between adult researcher and participant child or youth, was ameliorated through good research ethics (as discussed above) and by taking account of the interests of the boys. They were made to feel that they were in charge of showing different and important aspects of their lives, and that they were the experts in how they felt about aspects of their lives. This method gave them a chance to become an important part of the research and indeed to feel as if they were important and conducting research independently and told me what they are and how they relate with the outer world.

Important Themes

The issues and pitfalls of interpretation of photos after an elicitation exercise have been discussed by other scholars, such as Morrow (2001), Young and Barrett (2001), Spyrou, (2011) and Graham, Phelps, Nhung, & Geeves (2014). Some concerns have been raised about the forms and authenticity of interpretation and the extent to which children are simply reproducing expectations of researchers or parents. It is worth noting in this respect that Morrow (2001) found that some children were not willing to discuss their photographs verbally but would do so in writing. By contrast, in this research, all participants volunteered their views readily, talked openly about their photographs and were keen to describe them in detail as experts in one-to-one discussion sessions. The common themes represented and discussed by boys using photo-elicitation technique were as follows:

- My work and my family
- Understanding of wider world issues
- My hobbies and future aspirations

The paper now discusses the three main themes that run through different photos:

My Work

One very obvious theme in the pictures was the work of the boys on the streets. During the explanation of the photos taken, they each explained that families are important part of their lives. Boys explained their living conditions – living in abject poverty, the boys have to work due to adults' unemployment and underemployment. Their work is thus not just an important part of their daily lives, but also essential for the economic survival of the families. However, it is important to note that the boys felt they were working not simply because of family poverty but also as a part of their cultural values and traditions, although this latter aspect of their lives is tangential to this article. Nevertheless, the cultural imperative to support the families financially is important and it covers most of their lives.

During discussions the boys also commented on the nature of their work and different kinds of exploitation including low wages, long hours and hazardous working environment and social stigma attached to them. According to one boy:

> I have suffered a lot by working on the streets. I was eight years old when I started to collect garbage. I am sixteen now and running my own business of garbage, I know it is not a respectable job considered by the society, but I did not have any other option as I know only this work. I live in this society where there is no respect for those children and youth who work on the streets. We garbage collectors are just garbage for them (Ali, 16-year-old boy).

Another boy expressed in this way:

> I could not understand that why we (all working boys and girls) cannot have a good working environment. It is the fact of the life that I have to work but there is much exploitation at work places. The employer gave me a very hard time during work and also gave me a little money. I work so hard to support my family (Umer, aged 13).
> (Insert figure 1. A boy working in a garbage collection garage).

Despite such negative experiences, the boys still work and earn a meagre amount of money which is important for support of their families. Due to filial responsibilities, they sacrifice many things in their lives and have very less learning and development opportunities in their living and working environment.

Sensitive to Outer World's Issues

It is notable that despite narrow hard working lives with little access to education, the boys articulated awareness of the wider world. For example, they sought to show their understanding of environmental issues, with pictures. Their photographs included garbage piles and dirty grounds where children and youths play cricket as well as trees and their importance in human lives, and in one case fascination with a seemingly clean, beautiful and decorated place such as a hotel. A boy took a picture of a boy working as rag picker (figure 2). He explained that despite his surroundings, this boy has the same rights as other people have such as: education, good health, and good future, as well as acknowledgement and status. The photographer asserted that there should be good schools for those children and youth who cannot attend schools in their early age due to poverty. He added that good employment opportunities should be provided to boys and adults in this city so that they could be out of poverty and so their families could have good quality of life. It was not merely an altruistic expression. During the discussion, he explained that this picture also reflected him because he also worked as garbage collector, and, indeed fellow-feeling was the main reason that he had taken this picture. According to him, he always felt inferior to others as he was aware that he was a very low-valued worker due to the attitude of other people and of society towards him in his daily life. (Insert figure 2. A boy is collecting rag).

It is also interesting to note that a boy aged 16 went to a hotel in Rawalpindi and took almost six photographs of that hotel. I assumed that he wanted to have a chance to stay in the hotel to experience a different treatment. However, upon explanation, he told that he took the pictures of hotel because he liked the hygiene and cleanliness of the hotel. He said that he wanted the whole city to be as clean as the hotel, with improved hygiene conditions across the whole city, which is full of garbage, germs and filth. The second explanation he gave was that he wanted tourism to be promoted in Rawalpindi, as this city is near to the Northern areas of Pakistan which are known for their natural beauty even though they are also currently suffering from terrorism and internal insurgency. Rawalpindi city is a good point to stay over and to start travel to those areas. The boy who expressed these ideas also showed that he knew very clearly that tourism could generate revenue and that there were ways that could develop the city into a better place for all to live. Despite my experience working with the boys, it was even surprising to me that a boy who works in an automobile shop could think and feels like this. In so doing he was revealing both his intelligence and his agency. It also showed his creativity to present himself through these pictures, and his sensitivity to his living environment for which he wanted to do something. These pictures also suggest that there is a need to involve youth in different projects to improve the city, in ways where they can express their ideas and share their responsibilities.

My Hobbies and Future Aspirations

Another boy aged 15, who was passionate about cricket, took a picture which showed a dirty and rough ground where boys were playing cricket (figure 3). He explained that sports in Pakistan should be promoted especially cricket, because as he saw it 'cricket is in our blood'. This is true. Although cricket is not Pakistan's national sport, it is played everywhere by everyone, albeit as an almost wholly male dominant sport. There is also a women's cricket team but it is appreciated only by few. The cricketing fans in this research, that was almost everyone, expressed the wish that those who want to play cricket or even who want to take it up as profession, should have good quality cricket grounds to play on where they could build their talents and skills. (**Insert figure 3.** A ground where boys play cricket).

Another boy aged 14 photographed goats and explained that this was his secondary income generation activity which he undertook with the help of mother who looked after the goats while he was working and attending school. He expressed the wish that he and his mother would be able to get a loan to expand this income generating activity. If he could do so he said he hoped they could amass sufficient money and he could leave his current job as garbage collector. He also expressed concerns about the serious lack of financial support or institutions which might work with working youth to provide loans according to their living conditions. He explained that he tried to get loans from the formal institutions but he could not. There were two main things which were major hurdles for him. The first was his age as he was just 14 when he approached different banks. Secondly, his poor income and living conditions did not follow any of the bank's criteria. He felt frustrated and wanted to have some money that he could expand his income generation activity, mentioned above. When Grameen Banks and other microfinance institutions were mentioned to him, he looked completely nonplussed and had obviously never heard of such systems despite the fact that they are designed for people just like him.

Discussion

The photo elicitation showed that working children and youth on the streets are not without either considered views or clever intellect, unlike the assumptions and many of the common attitudes of the society towards them. It is important to take them seriously and to

explore more thoroughly the visual data which is generated in this research. That data shows how they are sensitive to wider world issues which affect their lives on daily basis. Keeping the child rights debate in mind, this research gave children and youth working on the street in Rawalpindi city a chance to show their real lives to me and hidden realities not known to me.

Surprisingly the shown realities are directly related to social policies, overall. Through their photographs, the boys showed those things which are important in their lives and which directly related to their daily lives. The boys raised many social policy issues. A major set of problems, for example appeared from the lack of economic activities for their adult family members which necessitated these boys having to work on the streets to support the family, highlighting their sensitivity and care towards their families, and awareness of their poor financial conditions.

The photographs also showed that often the boys are working in occupations which are hazardous and dangerous, such as rag picking. Rag picking is searching through the cities' dump sites to find the recyclable items, and in so doing, sorting and sifting through plastic material, glass, bread, iron/steel and the like. Rag picking is one evident example of hazardous work identified by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2014). However, there are many children in Rawalpindi city who are involved in this occupation. According to them, rag picking is the 'easiest' work to do, but only because it does not need any training and everyone can earn some money. On the other hand, they all also mentioned the dirt, heat, and smoke, as well as needing to walk almost well over five kilometres a day and dealing with dangers inherent in rag picking, especially with general and hospital waste in particular. However, despite some public recognition of these hazards, no steps have been taken by the local governments or other support governmental organisations to regulate rag picking at the time of this research.

The boys' photographs revealed their interest in recreational activities and their awareness of a lack of recreational facilities and parks available to them. They talked about their passion for different sports including cricket which they saw as a means of doing something excellent with their lives. Their comments and ideals implied that the lack of sports facilities limited their capacity to channel their energies and hopes in a positive direction.

It is also noteworthy that none of the boys who took part in the photo elicitation research technique, portrayed themselves as diseased, sick, isolated, weak, lost or with any other negative images as discussed by Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013). Certainly, when explaining their photos, they talked about their need for respect and dignity, and the prevalence of economic exploitation, as well as their awareness that they were less fortunate as compared to those children and youth who could go to school, did not work on the streets, and were not impoverished. Nevertheless, their photographs and their accounts revealed that they valued themselves as important helping hands for their families. It was made very clear in discussions, that they also believed that while they were working, they could also have fun, as well as build strong relationships with their families and other working children which shows their connections to the outer world. The boys thus sought to show how they had some control over their lives and could relax, take some leisure and even raise their voices by participating in research - if a chance were given to them.

It is also to mention that in some respects, the lack of awareness by policy-makers is perhaps not surprising in the Pakistani context. First it is difficult for adults to realise that children and youth working on the streets have views about society and its issues which they are able to articulate well. Secondly, many administrators and policy makers fail to accept children and youth as active beings in their lives who can think logically and critically. Thirdly, even those who know these aspects resist accepting young people as valid participants in those matters which are related to them. It simply appears that it has not

entered adults' minds that they should involve young people in policy formulation and programme development. Finally, it is also a challenge for adults to involve young people in such a way that engages them. To gain optimal understanding of children and youth, it is essential that they feel relaxed, and perhaps could also learn from the whole exercise of consultation and participation. Such practices are especially needful in a country where old notions and rigid concepts of hierarchy and patriarchy still persist and where political willingness to change things is not evident. There is, indeed, as has been discussed by Lansdown (2010) and Mayall (2012) that there is no culture to listen to children or youth.

Overall, the discussion and analysis of the photographs revealed that the responsible local government institutions appear to give little consideration for children's and youth's rights, and so fail to develop their capacities and capabilities. Yet there are economic and moral imperatives to build capabilities. It is thus important for the government institutions to evaluate their current services and programmes, and offer those programmes and services which will not only fulfil working children's and youth's basic needs and interests but also look into the development of strategic needs which ultimately leads to educated, economically independent and active labour force in future.

Conclusion

This research has sought to show how children and youth can share their lived experiences with researchers, even those which are not very pleasant, but which they face on the daily basis. The photo-elicitation technique demonstrated how considerable insights and information could be elicited from boys with whom good rapport already existed. The feeling of ownership of the process of taking photos and then explaining and elaborating on the finished pictures built on that good rapport. It showed that the boys were less hesitant, more open and more insightful when they generated the material themselves, and highlighted aspects of their daily lives and hopes. It revealed the hidden realities of boys' lives which were previously unexplored. It can be hoped that in the long run and through innovative techniques of qualitative research, young people's agency will be acknowledged at governmental and political levels to begin to meet the needs of the Afghan and Pathan working children and youth on the streets, so that they might reach their potential and become less marginal in the society.

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Figure 1: A boy working in a garbage collection garage

Figure 2: A ground where boys play cricket

Figure 3: A boy is collecting rag