



## Studying Play Preferences: Methodological and Ethical Concerns in Researching *With* Children

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**Abstract:** This paper outlines methodological and ethical concerns of conducting research *with* children and locating them as collaborators in the research process. The paper draws from broader research- an ethnographic study which argued that researching with children, especially on the issues concerning their lives (including play) requires a distinct orientation to the research subject/ theme, an evolved set of methods and techniques to encourage their participation (Sharma, 2021). Reiterating children's positionality in the research process, the paper exhibits that children are experts in their own lives. Adopting the social constructionist perspective, the paper talks about data-generation methods following a mosaic approach (Fraser et al., 2004) including strategies and negotiations taken up by the researcher in the field. Some of these include-navigating the parental consent, utilising the play time for rapport building and interaction, developing a shared vocabulary, and lastly, negotiating the twofold power structure between the researcher and the researched (adult and the child). Further, some of the ethical considerations discussed include children's capacity to understand what the research is about, in giving assent or informed consent, concerns of privacy between parents and children, being sensitive to the implications of rights of privacy-how a researcher can find ways to give active voice to children's experiences and how children and childhood's conceptualisation has a bearing upon the way children are viewed. Lastly, examining critically the socially subordinate positioning of children, this paper establishes them as *social actors* and rightful collaborators in the research process.

**Keywords:** Researching *with* children, Mosaic-approach, Social-construction of childhood, Play, Ethics

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## Introduction

This paper is curated from the broader ethnographic work conducted from 2016-2021, that explored children's leisure preferences in the selected localities of the south-west district of Delhi. Children's homes and neighbourhood spaces including public parks, streets and by-lanes of the locality were the field-site for the study. The participants for the study were children from 6 to 14 years of age, occasionally their parents, elder members of the family (or any other caregiver) who accompanied them to parks, also participated in the conversation. This paper broadly covers the methodological and ethical concerns that followed as well as evolved while conducting the fieldwork, well in collaboration with research participants i.e. children. With these evolved research and data generation strategies while exploring children's play preferences, this paper established children as potential collaborators in the research process.

Research as we know, is not an individual process. During the process of research, individuals who participate in the process at different phases are no less than our co-researchers. We seek their participation to accomplish our research objectives and the entire process. To designate our research participants, there are various terminologies that are adopted in different disciplines based on methodological and theoretical orientations and research styles. These nomenclatures of research participants may range from calling them as subjects, participants, informants or respondents, collaborators and, other terms; where each term carries with it an underlying understanding. The term *subject* is used in disciplines like psychology, especially to mark a relative position between the researcher and the researched that for data collection people are acted upon. It can be read as a term denoting the limited agency accorded to participants in the process of research, and treating them as passive. *Informants* in a similar fashion can be understood as the people who inform us about our research i.e. have a limited role to play in the process of research. *Respondents* can be understood as people who answer or respond to the questions asked by the researcher. *Collaborators* can be understood as a term keeping in mind an ethical position where the researcher and researched aims to operate at the same plane. In this study, I have designated my research participants i.e. children as *collaborators* acknowledging their active participation in shaping the research. The section below summarises the larger theoretical and methodological framework of the Social Constructionist Perspective- the New Sociology of Childhood (James & Prout, 1997) followed in conducting this study.

## **Social Constructionist Perspective: Understanding the Marginalised Status of Children**

In traditional research, children's lives and childhood have been studied following the *adultist* perspective. Kehily (2012) in her work showed that the philosophical presentations of children and their childhood as a phase of innocence and dependence actually end up doing more harm than good to them. It further strengthens the structurally vulnerable status of children rather than questioning and re-configuring it. Thereby any research derived from this standpoint is bound to treat children as vulnerable. Categorising children as vulnerable, in itself, places them in a subordinate position. This subordinate positioning has a bearing on how their agency is understood (and practised) in the process of research. Are they considered incapable to decide for themselves? Or empowered enough to take informed consent and decisions? Such subordinate positioning robs children of their genuine voices and the possibility of exercising their rights and choices (to participate or not in the process of research).

Until the 1970s studying children and childhood was not treated as a distinct field of study. The shift in perspective towards children could be credited to the policy focus on children in 1989 by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In article 12 of UNCRC, the concept and practice of a *child's voice* are stated firmly. During the 1970s and 1980s, this shift in the perception of children and childhood was pronounced by James (2009) as "a break with tradition" (p. 37). During this period, many movements started focusing on the position of children in society. For example, the launch of the International Year of the Child in 1979 brought multiple notions about children, such as the world's children, happy, safe, protected, innocent childhoods, and child abuse, to the forefront (Norozzi & Moen, 2016). Universal theories of children's development during this time period came under scrutiny. Piaget's (1952) work on child development was also challenged whereas Vygotsky's (1978) work which took children's social location into account was recognised. Vygotsky's work accorded a greater role to the child's social and cultural context with respect to her/his development.

The social constructionist perspective helps us in understanding the positioning of children in society. It helps in uncovering the assumptions and perspectives of looking at children. For example: what purpose does it serve to locate children as dependent or independent; in need of protection or not and whose purpose does such an image of children serve? Children in need of care, dependent children or independent children, all such discourses are shaped

by society; further shaping the treatment of children and thereby shaping their childhood experiences. As depicted in the social construction of childhood, it is very much grounded in different cultures, and societies with respect to the time (periods in history), and thereby treats child and childhood as a socio-cultural and temporal category. This perspective emphasises the diversity of situations that children experience which in a way shapes their childhood. In this direction, the New Sociology of Childhood (James & Prout, 1997) contributed towards childhood studies and established children and young people as agents or social actors thereby elevating their role as active participants of research. The traditional methods of looking down at children have been challenged and in a more contextualised manner, children's lives are rather looked up and studied holistically (Richards et al., 2015). This theoretical framework forms the core of the study and is followed in conducting the research and data generation.

### **New Sociology of Childhood: Shift from Research *On* Children to Research *With* Children**

New Sociology of Childhood treats childhood as social construction and children as active agents (Corsaro, 2018; James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994). This theoretical framework proposes a methodology that promotes participatory research with children. This theoretical framework also emphasises that children are not passive objects but rather competent and active agents. Viewing children as having agency means viewing them as capable of reflecting upon and making decisions about things that concern them. James and Prout (1997) listed six key features of this new paradigm- the New Sociology of Childhood, which are:

1. The socially constructed childhood is different from biological immaturity. It is a contextualised interpretation of human's early life based on societal beliefs and cultures.
2. Childhood is intertwined with other social variables in societies such as gender, class, ethnicity, etc.
3. Children's own individual perspectives must be considered while studying children and childhood.
4. Children must be viewed as active participants not only in the construction of knowledge about them but also in the construction of society as a whole.
5. Due to the direct involvement of children in the construction of knowledge about them, ethnography is a useful methodology for studying childhood.

6. The new paradigm of childhood sociology is to respond to the process of reconstructing childhood. (p. 8)

Therefore, methodological and ethical concerns are not two separate sets of guidelines or protocols that are to be followed at different stages of research with children. But these actually go hand in hand all throughout the process of research right from conceptualisation of the research to the publication and dissemination of the knowledge produced. The following section discusses the continuous negotiations that I as a researcher carried out in the field while generating the data with my research collaborators.

### **Data Generation Strategies: Methods and Techniques**

Under the New Sociology of Childhood framework, the study administered *mosaic-approach* (Fraser et al., 2004) that aims at *discovering* the relatively uncharted world of young children. The positioning of children is that young children are “experts in their own lives” (p. 16). This approach is based on child-friendly data collection methods which include taking non-participant and participant observations with children in the street, in their neighbourhood and home spaces. It also included conversations with children about their favourite games, preferred ways of spending leisure time and even having playing sessions with them.

### **Rapport Building, Briefing about Research and Taking Consent**

As part of the ethnographic exploration, the starting phase of the study entailed observations- non-participant, which later transitioned into participant observations where I actively took the role of a playmate. At this stage, I started talking one-on-one with my participants during and after the play sessions. As a traditional method of note-taking, initially, I used to carry my notebook and made diary entries in pointers that children shared during conversation. But this way of data generation completely failed, as I happened to be out in the field, attempting to generate the data and talking to children all during their playtime.

Playtime, which was a very precious and limited time slot that children had in their otherwise packed everyday routine, was cherished by them. During their playtime when children went out to play; they did not like my presence and me asking questions to them. However, it was observed that while children were playing in parks or streets during their limited and (very precious) playtime, many did not show interest in talking to me, and some rather misbehaved and expected me to go away and not intrude on their

playtime and play space. Any kind of distraction or probing during this time was met with several kinds of rejections by children.

The process of entering the field is a very complicated process for any research. For this research also entry into the field entailed a dense process of negotiation that further helped me build rapport and inculcation of trust and friendship with my participants. As the entry point into the field, I started my work with non-participant observations. I used to go and sit in parks (for hours) after registering children's presence.

The initial site of exploration i.e. the public parks and street spaces, which were mostly dusty and noisy spaces, and my presence in these spaces with my notebook (trying to write something) sparked a curiosity in my participants. As these public spaces do not amount to a perfect study space, my presence with a notebook (field diary) was often questioned by children. Seeing me sitting at many unusual spots (for study) with my notebook, thinking and writing-children curiously used to ask me questions regarding what I was doing there and so on. Some children though used to initially observe me from afar during the initial days, after a couple of weeks gathered around me to probe further i.e. asking questions around my presence directly, whereas others would simply hover around me from all possible directions to peep into my notebook to see if I was actually studying or doing something else sitting in the park. Children used to come and ask, "*aap kya likh rahe ho? Aap kyu aye ho?...chale jaoge na kaam karke?* (What are you writing? Why are you sitting/ studying here?... Will you go back after doing/completing your work?) Being present though (mostly) on a corner bench, sitting silently with my notebook and engrossed in writing- my presence still caught children's attention.

With children, such initial conversations, trust-mistrust relationship and their curiosity about my work (the act of sitting and writing in a park) and about my presence, in general, acted as the first entry point wherein I introduced myself and my aim- to be there at that time. About my affiliation and my research, I used to introduce myself by saying, "*Main ABC college mein padhti hu, hame homework mila hai games ke baare mein likhna hai, isliye main yaha aapke games dekhne ai hu*" (I study at ABC college, we have got this homework, wherein we are supposed to write about games that children play and that is why I am sitting here to observe games). With such an initial set of conversations, I sought children's consent and participation in the research.

In the later phase, with sincere and regular follow-ups to my field and at times on the invitation of children to be present at the designated spot at the time given by children, I could manage to establish familiarity and then a strong

rapport with children. After initial rapport building, it was relatively easy for me to be part of their respective groups and play along with them. During the play, I often used to ask questions showing that I did not understand a certain game or rule. Then, children used to take initiative and explain the rules of the game, or any other doubt that I used to enquire about. This inversion of hierarchy i.e. children explaining to me something in which they were experts, allowed them a distinct kind of agency and they took more and more interest in explaining their leisure preferences, favourite spaces of play etc. After repeated attempts children accepted me as their playmate, but this act turned me into an *object of suspicion for adults in the vicinity*. In general, it was unusual for them to see an adult woman playing with young children, roaming in streets and by lanes casually without any logical purpose (according to the older members of the locality).

Talking about play in general and favourite games of children in particular, gave children an upper hand in sharing things confidently and in detail. Not being in the structured setting of school (or any institution) helped children exercise agency and question their adult status by challenging it via their play. Given the topic of conversation as preferred play (and games) children during the study were found to be at ease expressing themselves at times leading to conversations that went on for hours

### **Redefining Adult- Child Relation: Inverting Down the Power Structure**

I would characterise this study as working *with* children rather than working *on* children by drawing horizontal rather than vertical lines of interaction between the researcher and the researched. This implies the degree of collegiality and equality in the way that researchers relate to researched community. The binary between children and adults thus breaks down as both inhabit life worlds that generate social meaning. In research with children, the adult interviewer and child interviewee relationship generates some important methodological considerations. Various researchers have looked at the interview process in terms of power (Wyness, 2012). Power, here is attributed to the unequal relationship that a researcher may claim due to her superior educational knowledge, thereby monopolising the situation. Such an imbalanced power equation may be balanced out by having conversations with children in groups. Hill (2006) and Wyness (2012) demonstrated the numerical advantage of having an interview with a group of children, where the power structure emerges in a balanced way. Hill (2006) mentions how children at times

participate in research after assessing the method of participation in research. Children prefer participation in research that “takes less of their time” (p. 84) and is executed in a child-friendly manner rather than having bulky interview schedules which make them uninterested and often opt out of the process.

In conducting this study also rather than as a researcher, I consciously downplayed my role as a *help-seeker*. Not belonging to the children’s age group and their circle, I foregrounded my incompetency with respect to contemporary games and unfamiliarity with video games and other modifications to playing in the city. This then gave children an opportunity to play a *responsible role* where some children actively volunteered to help me out with my homework (i.e. research). A class three child remarked, “*apko agar aur bhi doubt ho na to ajana, main apka homework kara dunga*” (if you face any other difficulty/doubt, do come again, I will help you with your homework). It is important to be aware of the fact that children tell us about their social worlds at a given time and place and, by virtue of our perceived powerful position of being an adult. But in research pertaining to children, striking a collective component along with participants to generate data is very important. It is important on the part of the researcher to move downwards in the hierarchical ladder and play the least adult role, which I tried by seeking children’s help.

Understanding children’s life worlds by gaining access, also adds to an added ethical responsibility on the part of the researcher. With constant negotiation in terms of balancing confidentiality, putting forward children’s concerns and at the same time being aware of the intrusiveness of the research process towards children, the research with children demands a high level of reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

### **Negotiating the Research Space by Shared Vocabulary**

Researching with children, Fraser (2004) addresses it as a “child-centred research methodology” (pp. 23-24) described in terms of its making sense for the children concerned. This making sense can be achieved when the researcher is able to explain and children are able to comprehend the research, with shared vocabularies between the researcher and young people. With the negotiated meanings between the two, then actually the child-centric methodology takes birth. Through such negotiations, in this study, I along with children developed particular types of child-friendly data collection strategies which included casual conversations, talking on the go (and while playing) rather than having dedicated sit-in question-answer or interview sessions. Talking while playing or servicing children on the swings was one of the ways the

data generation technique evolved as per the requirements of the work. As in their playtime, mostly while going to or coming from tuition (and at home in between different activities), children were hesitant to sit back and talk in an interview fashion. Also, it made me uneasy that by researching children's play, I am exhausting their playtime only.

The needed vocabulary, according to Fraser (2004) must emerge "in situ with the researched (here children) ....[and]... 'neither the child, nor the researcher's lack of vocabulary' implies a lack in reasoning powers" (Fraser, 2004, p. 24). In this study also, I have developed such vocabulary with children in the initial phases where I introduced my work as *homework*, shared terminologies of play say *ekkam duggo teej* (to be read as 1,2,3- the name of the game) and even *shared understanding of timings and space*- where to meet and when. Another instance of shared understanding was of my playing together where after winning or losing a match, everyone else had to contribute monetarily to the winning team which would serve as a fund towards necessary refreshments for all the players (for the day). In this contribution, by virtue of being an adult member (and new entry to the group), my share was initially supposed to be greater than their individual share. Here children tactfully negotiated with my adult privilege for their benefit. But, to continue being a member of their group I too had to agree to the *shared rule*, which we later negotiated and modified further.

## Conclusion

Research with children entails a combination of ethical considerations, such as children's capacity to understand what the research is about, in giving assent or informed consent, concerns of privacy between parents and children and so on. In such a situation the question arises, being sensitive to the implications of rights of privacy, how can a researcher find ways to give an active voice to children's experiences? While doing research with young children, in what ways does the ethical responsibility of the researcher increase? How s/he should perceive non-verbal cues from children? If any child declines to participate in the research process despite the consent provided by a significant adult (or vice versa) then how the child's (or significant adult's) decision must be respected?

Working with children as research participants entailed an active introspection of many other modalities and perspectives. In research with children, power dynamics operated at two levels. The first level is the placing of an adult and a child in society, where an adult is placed at a privileged level over the child who is always considered as an adult in making. Second is the level of conducting research- to be able to research and be researched

upon. Also, the setting of conducting the research with respect to time, space, presence of other children or adult members around had a bearing on children's participation in the research. Scott (2008) in her work shows that children's personalities are "context-dependent" (p. 92). Research carried out with the same set of children in different settings say at home, in the presence of an adult member or at school can then vary their levels of engagement in research. The familiarity with the surroundings provided a sense of confidence to children, thereby putting them at ease with the research process. In the context of the present study, which was conducted in neighbourhood settings at various parks, streets, children's homes and other familiar spaces of theirs; children in a way not only participated but also directed the research. Apart from following the ethical protocols, a researcher working with children must also be aware of the ethical radar (Skånfors, 2009) and be vigilant enough to assess and make spontaneous decisions while in the field.

Despite following the ethical radar, during the research process, many tensions emerged. Since the research was conducted in a neighbourhood setting and children participated in this work, but for institutional publication only children's consent may not be counted. For such structural reasons, the research had to incorporate elder members of the children's family in the larger process of obtaining consent but with an awareness of its possible limitations too. As a contribution in foregrounding research with children and children's voices to the forefront, this work reiterates that it is high time now that children's views be taken on board with utmost seriousness, without discrediting it as *childish*, which is rooted in the assumption and structural fault of putting them in socially-subordinate positioning in the society. Such hierarchical structures are hindering children's participation as active social actors and *rightful collaborators in the research process*.

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