

## A Critical Analysis of Research with Children: Differences from Research with Adults

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### Abstract

Children were considered weak and lack of experience. The perspectives, nevertheless, have changed; children are competent to deliver their voices. Therefore, there is a need to do research with children so that adults can understand their childhood. The principles of research with children and research with adults might differ. The researchers did qualitative study analysing documents, highlighting the differences between them. Three themes appeared. The first is ethical aspect; children's researchers need to gain consent from children's gatekeepers. The second is rapport building; researchers apply unique strategies, such as role-playing to provide comfort during the research. The last is child-rights based approach; researchers should consider that children's insights can contribute to adults' understanding of children's experiences. This study's practical implication is that it contributes information to potential researchers to apply specific strategies for research with children that might not be applied to research with adults because of their maturity nature.

**Keywords:** *research with children; gatekeepers' consent; rapport building; child-rights based approach*

### Abstrak

Anak-anak dulunya dianggap lemah dan kurang pengalaman. Namun, perspektif tersebut telah berubah; anak-anak kompeten untuk menyampaikan suara mereka. Oleh karena itu, perlu dilakukan penelitian dengan anak-anak agar orang dewasa dapat memahami kehidupan anak-anak. Prinsip penelitian dengan anak-anak dan penelitian dengan orang dewasa mungkin berbeda. Dengan demikian, para peneliti ini melakukan studi kualitatif yaitu menganalisa dokumen mengenai perbedaan diantara kedua penelitian tersebut. Tiga tema muncul. Tema pertama adalah aspek etika; peneliti anak-anak perlu mendapatkan persetujuan dari wali. Tema kedua adalah membangun hubungan baik; peneliti menerapkan strategi unik, seperti bermain peran untuk memberikan kenyamanan selama penelitian. Tema terakhir adalah pendekatan berbasis hak anak; peneliti harus mempertimbangkan bahwa wawasan anak-anak dapat berkontribusi pada pemahaman orang dewasa tentang pengalaman anak-anak. Implikasi praktis penelitian ini adalah memberikan kontribusi informasi kepada para peneliti untuk menerapkan strategi khusus untuk penelitian dengan anak-anak yang mungkin tidak diterapkan untuk penelitian dengan orang dewasa karena sifat kedewasaan mereka.

**Kata Kunci:** *penelitian anak; persetujuan wali; rapport building; pendekatan berbasis hak anak*

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## INTRODUCTION

Children were previously viewed as individuals who are vulnerable (Usman, 2014) and incompetent or innocent (Lyle, 2014). Children are vulnerable in two ways (Schweiger, 2019): firstly, because of their inherited vulnerability, such as physical weaknesses and lack of knowledge and experience, which leads them to depend on adults, and secondly, their structural vulnerability, particularly their lack of political and economic power and civil rights. In terms of competence, adults may view children as lacking in cognitive competence (Burger, 2012), for example children's inability to find the causes for and to understand laughter. However, those perspectives have changed, and children are now viewed as knowledgeable and competent members of society who can construct their own knowledge (Kendrick, 2012). Therefore, researchers recently involve children in their research to understand children's childhood and experiences. Several aspects are considered essential when involving children in research. Among these are the long-standing discussions on children as competent beings and the concept of children and childhood.

There are three key concepts in understanding research involving children: children as competent individuals, the concepts of children and childhood and children's right (Parkes, 2013). In terms of competence, children have knowledge and identity and are constructors of culture. Childhood is socially constructed for and by children (Norozi & Moen, 2016). This means that children are social actors who participate and determine their own lives; they have their own voices that should be listened to in order to understand childhood, and these can be used to make decisions related to them. In other words, children are competent from the perspective that they are active, not passive, learners; instead, they are actively engaged with the world and equipped with expressions and potentials (Hein et al., 2015). This engagement constructs knowledge and creates meaning, and together with adults, child learning emerges in the process of self- and social construction (Norozi & Moen, 2016). Furthermore, Children are competent, as they are born with a lot of language capabilities (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019), possibilities and potentialities that stimulate each other. It is further claimed that by being active and competent, children are not only worth listening to, but also worth analysis or observation or even merit questioning and challenging.

The second conceptual framework is related to the concept of children and childhood. In the early eighteenth century, childhood was seen as innocent and pure. Children are the product of their environment; they are born as a blank slate that waits for the environment to shape them. Then, in the twentieth century, when the research was dominated by scientific and laboratory-based research, research on children was about stages of development inquiry conducted in psychological experiments. Subsequently, towards the end of the twentieth century, children came to be viewed as social actors in the community. This last concept adopts the sociological view that children during childhood act and have roles as distinct populations. This sociological concept influences the approach of research 'with' children (Christensen & James, 2017).

Some researchers directed research significantly towards children, moving away from the direction that had previously focused on the measurement of child development to the active agency of children. There were four models of childhood: *the developing child*, *the tribal child*, *the adult child*, and *the social child* (Race & O'Keefe, 2017). The *developing child* refers to traditional research models with children based on research of psychological development and wellbeing from child to adult through measurement. The second model, the *tribal model*, viewed children as socially competent and autonomous in their cultural world. This model shows the light of interpretation of children's language competence, where the researcher translates and interprets the child's perspective on the world. This model acknowledged that children are simply different and autonomous in their world; it does not matter if this is not congruent with the adult world. The third model, the *adult child*, holds that children are comparable to adults, so that the research approach is the same as that applied to adults. This model emphasises gaining children's perspective toward the adult's world based on their observations around them. The final model is the *social child*. This is based on the notion that children engage themselves in

everyday activities or society (Abebe, 2019). This means that children are social actors who are accepted as competent in social and cultural contexts.

This widening scope of research models with children from traditional to societal models has initiated and increased the agenda of research that gives opportunities to children through their rights and focuses on childhood as a social context in which children are a distinct population (Theobald, 2019). This has led to the development of research through ethnography, in which the researcher can see child activity in society, and to a new research perspective, the rights-based approach. This views children as active participants and has triggered the use of the term research 'with' children, where they have the right to show their voice and communicate through their participation in the research (Kyritsi, 2019). It is not research 'on' children, where they are objects of psychological experiment that focuses on seeing their development from child to adult.

The third conceptual framework deals with children's rights. It is stated in international law that children have the right to be heard (Liebel, 2012). Article 12 of the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child) 1989 adopted by the United Nations stipulates that children who can form their views have the right to express their thoughts and opinions related to matters affecting them. This means that children should be allowed to be heard to participate in all issues concerning them. The framework of children's rights leads to the approach of research with children in which children's opinions and views are sought (Emerson & Lloyd, 2012). Sociologists stipulate that childhood is a social construction in which children are the social actors; this means that children are competent, knowledgeable and powerful members of society. In other words, children are the expert in their own lives (Hanna, 2020). Therefore, research with children and childhood is worthy of investigation in their own right, separated from their parents or their caregivers (Moody & Darbellay, 2019). Since the framework of children's rights is stated in Article 12 of the CRC 1989, it is important to involve children as potential participants in the research related to children and regard them as important social actors who know best about their social construction, childhood.

As children are recently considered active agents to convey their experiences, research with children flourish. However, considering their unique conditions and capacities, researchers might carefully undertake the research with children. Therefore, it is essential to explore the extent to which research with children should differ from research with adults. This study examines whether the principles of research with children are the same or different from research with adults.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach. The researchers did document analysis to identify whether research with adults and children differ. Document analysis is one of forms of qualitative research that employs systematic steps to analyse documentary evidence in printed or electronic versions, such as reports, public policies, agenda, memos, videos, or speeches that can answer specific questions (Frey, 2018). The document analysis method was chosen to understand policy content regarding research with children and its differences from research with adults. This method is also useful to triangulate across countries' policies and reports in relation to research with children (Dalglish, Khalid, & McMahon, 2020).

The researchers analysed various documents related to research with adults and children, such as reports, policies, and guidelines from educational institutions and educational research association across several countries. There were eight documents collected through official websites of the institutes or the associations: BERA (2018), Berman et al. (2016), Children's Bioethics Centre (2013), Johnson, Hart, & Colwell (2014, August 1), NSPCC (2020), Save the Children (2016, January 5), and UNICEF (2017, March 1). Then, thematic analysis was utilized as the strategy to examine the documents. Thematic analysis is a way to recognize a pattern within the data through the emerging themes (Chanda, 2021). The steps that these researchers took within the thematic analysis process were as follows. First, the researchers did a cautious review

and re-read the documents and selected the information based on the aim of this research, examining the extent to which research with children should differ from research with adults. After that, the researchers carried out coding and grouping construction (Chanda, 2021). The researchers used the guidance suggested by Parkes (2013) in relation to key approaches to identify whether researching with adults and research with children are different. The process of thematic analysis was displayed in the Figure 1.

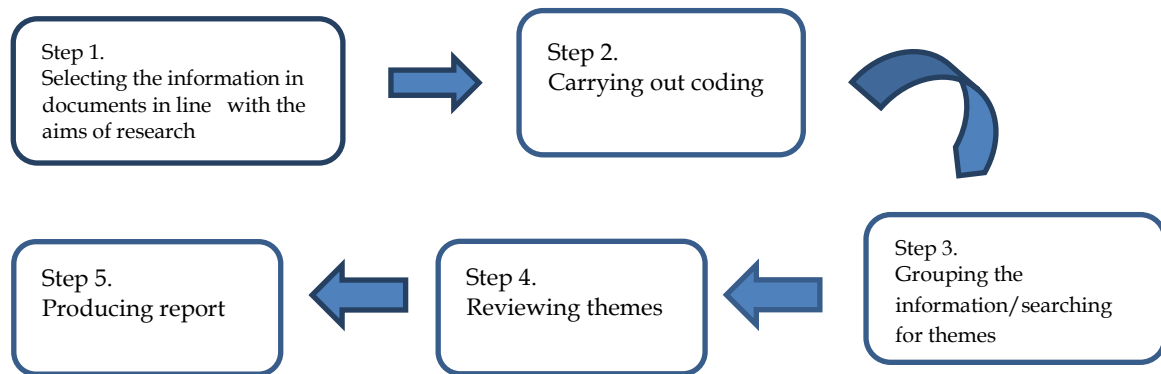


Figure 1. Diagram of thematic analysis process

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis that the researchers had done, the following themes appeared regarding whether research with children and research with adults differ. First, the ethical research principles between research with children and research with adults are not the same, particularly in relation to principles of consent and minimising harm. Basically, the principles of consent apply to both children and adults. Nevertheless, all documents examined stated that researchers should follow the UNCRC (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) principles regarding the duties of those who have legal responsibility for children in terms of the guardianship, such as parents, guardians, or social workers. It was stated that researchers should gain consent from guardians or parents in the research as well as from children as they also should be granted to deliver their voice in all matters that affect them. The requirement of consent from guardians leads to that research with children is potentially different from research with adults.

This finding is supported by past researchers that adults and children should give their consent before taking part in the research. However, informed consent by participating children in research is complex because of their minority status (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). Researchers need to pay special attention to the principle of informed consent for children because they are vulnerable, weak, passive, lacking in knowledge, have limited language ability and are open to abuse from exploitative researchers. Therefore, consent for children is given by adults who have legal care and control, such as parents, guardians and schools as the gatekeepers who protect children from exploitative researchers. However, there may be a conflict of interest; for example, parents may refuse to give consent, while children want to join the research. This conflict has led to a debate on the age at which children can provide their own consent. The legal limit age at which individuals are defined as children varies from country to country. A child is a minor until reaching the age of 18, while The Mental Capacity Act 2005 states that young people can give their full consent to participate in research independently from the age of 16. Similarly, under the Family Law Reform Act of 1969, children of 16 to 17 are perceived to be competent to give their consent (Rooyen, 2016).

However, under the Act of 1989 (House of Lords Select Committee), children under 16 may consent to treatment if they can show that they have sufficient understanding and intelligence about what is proposed to them. Still, it is advisable to obtain parental consent even though children are legally competent (Rooyen, 2016). A combination of parental and child



consent is needed; although the researcher may have parental consent, the child's consent is also needed (Rooyen, 2016). It is a fundamental right of every child, regardless of age or ability, to be informed about the research as participants. Therefore, the researcher should explain the research to children in a language they can understand, the methods and the timetable. The researcher must also clarify the risk the children might have while involved in the research or problems they might have during the process. Child-friendly information leaflets, posters, drawings, explanations and scenario-acting activities may help children understand what the research is and what they agree to (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019).

Another issue with informed consent is that of covert participant observation (Roulet et al., 2017). In the research design, the researcher may not inform participants that they are being observed (Roulet et al., 2017). It is thought that if participants are aware of this, they may change their behaviour. Therefore, the researcher may not get a true or normal picture of participant behaviour. Some researchers state that this type of research raises concerns about ethical practice in research, regardless of whether or not the participants give consent to their participation. This would contradict ethical research principles that clearly state that consent should be obtained from research participants (Greg et al., 2013). There are two kinds of harm that may occur if the outcomes of research are shown to the public (Greg et al., 2013). First, participants may suffer from feelings of betrayal if they realise that people that they trust have conducted research on them without notifying them in advance. Second, activities that the group has done that may be secretive can become publicly exposed. To reduce harm to participants, it is first of all important that the researcher keeps their secrets or carries out debriefing, possibly by following the standards suggested by the APA (American Psychological association) (Orcher, 2014). Furthermore, debriefing also includes revealing the status of the researcher at the end of the research (Orcher, 2014). Second, the researcher can reduce harm in covert research by preserving the anonymity of the participants in the research process. Keeping anonymity also means that ensuring that participants cannot be identified in any associated research (Roulet et al., 2017). This is because it is quite common that respondents are aware that the identities of certain characteristics are identifiable by stakeholders. Therefore, the researcher should take extra care to protect the respondents (Shymko & Roulet, 2016). In relation to approval from ethics boards for researching children, there might be two dimensions of aspects of consent where it is obtained from several institutional levels: ethical boards or university, at the organisational level, from gatekeepers, as well as at the individual level or children (Roulet et al., 2017). Furthermore, past researchers suggest that covert observation is not necessarily purely covert; ethical boards and researchers can work together to identify effective ways to protect participants by combining overt and covert aspect in observation (Shymko & Roulet, 2016).

The second subtheme appeared in relation to ethics principle was minimising harm. The reports and policy investigated agreed to define minimising harm as a way that the research should not harm or bring consequences for people being studied and for others, or for future researchers investigating the same phenomenon or in the same setting. Concerning child research, children are perceived vulnerable as they are seen as an incomplete version of adults or perceived to occupy risky space (Greg, Taylor, & MacKay, 2013). Therefore, research with children is recognized as a risky project (Berman et al., 2016). Consequently, government legislation is crucial to protect children in the process of research due to their vulnerability. The documents analysed in this study declared that the researchers may use the UNCRC as the foundation to protect children on the research. This idea is supported by other researchers that the international principles are very important to follow as the guidelines for researching children. The International principles that have been established to protect children from adults and other children include the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund, Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and The Children's Act 1989 (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1989). These regulations show global concern for children's protection.

The second theme in relation to whether research with adults and research with children differ was building rapport. Building rapport means building a relationship or trust (Griffith & Johnson, 2019). Good relationship is essential to minimise the social distance between the researcher and participants (Barley & Bath, 2014). For example, in the interview process of research with children, a good relationship or rapport can make the interviewee feel comfortable and competent to talk to the interviewer. Although the processes of building rapport with adults and children are basically the same, the main areas for concern are the possibility of patronising children, not behaving appropriately towards them during the research process or not finding ways where rapport can be built (Barley & Bath, 2014). This theme is supported by past studies explaining some certain strategies employed to build rapport with children as participants of research.

When researching with children, the researcher can employ several forms of play, for example, drawing, role-playing, using props and so forth to enhance the children's level of comfort (Green, 2017). These techniques may help create a natural context that deals with the child context. However, adults should not assume that all forms of play might be appealing for all children. For example, adults might assume that drawing is appealing, but not all children feel comfortable with it. Past researchers propose a tribal approach that raises awareness of the importance of studying the children in their own right (Kilkelly & Lundy, 2017). This emphasises child-centred research in child-centred settings, for instance, in the playground (Opie & Opie, 2013). This can minimise the consequences of adult control, structure children's lives and provide a natural context that increases children's comfort. It can also help build a good relationship with the researcher (Ripat & Becker, 2012).

Furthermore, task-centred activities are also believed to build rapport in researching children (Tickle, 2017). Activities that engage children in research with their talents and interests may provide better ways to allow them to express their ideas and opinions, rather than the talk-centred activities of interviews or questionnaires. Some examples of task-centred activities are when children are asked to express themselves through sentence completion, taking photographs or drawing pictures or combining these methods. Besides encouraging children to express their ideas, views and opinions, these techniques can help to foster rapport between the researcher and children (Soffer & Ben-Arieh, 2014).

With regard to interviews with children, past researchers offer the following strategies for building rapport: working with parents to learn about children's preferences and what can facilitate their comfort during interviews, organising several meetings before the research begins, and using multiple interview techniques as long interviews may be challenging for some children (Saywitz et al., 2015). Furthermore, before the interview begins, the researcher and participants can get to know each other. This is an effective way of building rapport, as it is thought that the interview then becomes personal as if sharing with a trusted friend (Saywitz et al., 2015).

Building rapport can also be enhanced by asking the participants to choose the location for interviews, which can also ensure a private setting for children to help them feel comfortable (Bushin, 2013). Moreover, as young participants may not fully understand the purpose of a research interview, it is the responsibility of the researcher to build working relationships with them. One way of doing this is by establishing a working relationship with parents. However, some researchers warn that research relationship should not involve the researcher trying to be a best friend for the children (Alderson & Morrow, 2020). The other way to build rapport is that the researcher can adopt 'least adult role' (Cumbo, Eriksson, & Iversen, 2019). Some advantages of this role in ethnography study are as follows: children are open to the researcher in some ways that do not usually happen with teachers, and children appreciate the researcher when he shows his interest in children's feeling and thought. In this way, the researcher as ethnographer can build a good relationship with children as the research participants.

In conclusion, building rapport in researching adult and children is almost similar. The differences lie in how researchers involve gatekeepers: parents or guardians, to get more information about the participants, behave appropriately, and employ various strategies that

relate to children's world: task-centred activities (drawing, photography, and so forth), various forms of play activities and least adult role of researcher.

The third theme that appeared when these researchers identify whether children and adults differ was the child rights-based approaches. These approaches are not applied in research with adults. This term describes the acknowledgement of a broad definition that encompasses the influence of human rights discourses and child rights principles of research with children that are operationalised in human rights and children's rights standards and principles (Bessel, 2015). This understanding is framed under the UN Statement of Common Understanding on Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development Cooperation and Programming, the Common Understanding adopted by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) in 2003. This is grounded in the UNCRC 1989 statement that advocates the right of children to be treated as active citizens concerning all matters related to their lives (O'Donnell, 2016).

It should be noted that some research developed over the last decades involving children prioritises adults' views over children's own views and opinions relating to their experiences. Therefore, using a child rights-based approach in research is a way to draw attention to children as 'right-holders', from social actors to rights-bearing citizens as stated in the UNCRC 1989 (Elliot, 2015), and as citizens that have a voice at levels of decision making, development and implementation of research.

Treating children as social actors is to see them as active participants in the context where they are traditionally denied to the rights of to take part and to be heard (Smith, 2011). It was stated that past researchers identified three research-based ideas when considering children as social actors: young children construct valid meanings about the world and their place in it; children's knowledge of the world is different (not inferior) to adults' knowledge, and children's insights and perspectives on the world can inform and improve adults' understanding of children's experiences.

A more recent model has emerged that considers children as rights-bearing citizens (Smith & Taylor, 2017). This model develops the argument that children and young people have the right to participate in the public sphere in policy formation and is aligned with the declaration of the UNCRC 1989. Therefore, a child rights-based approach to children's participation in research consists of ensuring that research with children complies with the recognition and implementation of children's rights. There are three major principles. First is the use of children's views and voices in research in light of their entitlements as rights-bearers (United Nations, 1989). Next is the involvement of children and young people in all stages of the research process, from the design stage to implementation, followed by the use of child-friendly methods that allow for research of children's lived experiences to generate accurate findings (O'Donnell, 2016). From this perspective, research aims and processes should be aligned with the UNCRC standards and principles, and research results should always be an instrument to build the capacity of children to exercise their rights and to strengthen the capacity of duty-bearers to fulfil their obligations.

Using child-friendly research methods is a way of applying different task-based methods, such as drawings, photographs, diaries, participatory research techniques (spider diagrams and activity tables) and worksheets with children. This allows children to be more comfortable with adult researchers and engage in research activities not just for fun but also to generate valuable and relevant data (Child to Child, 2015). In conclusion, the child-right-based approach integrates child rights standards and principles into the research practice of researching children. This approach views children as individuals with the right holders in the research: the right to show their views and opinions, be engaged, and be informed in child-friendly research.

## CONCLUSION

This study found three themes that research with children differs from research with adults: ethical issues, rapport building and child rights-based approach. Children need gatekeepers' consent for joining research to protect them from exploitative researchers. Children researchers may use various strategies, such as drawing or task-centre related activities, to

enhance children's comfort during participation in research. Lastly, children researchers should value principles concerning research with children, for example, embracing children as the right holders who can engage in research, express their ideas, contribute valuable data, and are deserved to get comfort during research with adult researchers.

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