Locating the (adult) researcher in participatory research with children

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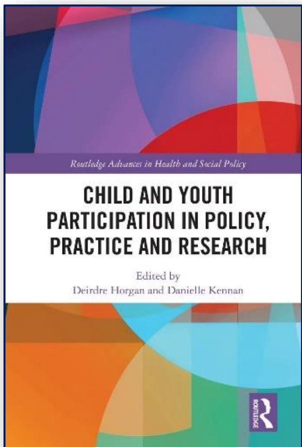

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Abstract

This chapter explores two questions central to the practice of participatory research with children: how do we take account of the identity and presence of the (adult) researcher in the research process, and how do we address these issues in writing a research report? Impersonal third-person writing is valued in academia because it is presumed to demonstrate objectivity, to maximise authority and to show respect for the conventions of the academy itself. In the social sciences, however, many researchers value 'reflexivity': a process of internal dialogue and self-evaluation, explicitly recognising how the researcher's identity and positionality affect the research process and its outcomes, particularly what is claimed as valid new knowledge. The author's experience writing up doctoral research in partnership with a team of child researchers in Nicaragua presented a dilemma, as a conventional formal style was mandated but the need for reflexivity was critical. Six ways in which the identity and personality of the researcher affected the research process and its outcomes are discussed, reinforcing the importance of researcher reflexivity. Resolving such issues presents challenges to researchers, particularly early-career researchers whose job prospects may depend on demonstrating mastery of the traditions of their discipline or institution.

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Introduction

In this chapter I explore two linked questions that are of vital importance to the practice of participatory research with children but are too often disregarded or glossed over. One is how we take account of the identity and positionality of the (adult) researcher in the way research is carried out – much of which comes under the heading of ‘researcher reflexivity’. The other is how we account for the identity and presence of the researcher in writing a research report, which, at the most basic level, involves a choice between writing in an impersonal, third-person style, or in the first person, identifying oneself in the text as ‘I’.

The chapter is in six parts. After this introduction, in the second section I look at why impersonal writing, and specifically the invisibility of the researcher as a person, is considered so important in academia. In the third section I introduce the contrary idea of researcher reflexivity, with its challenge to the notion of objectivity in research, and consequent insistence on bringing the persona of the researcher out of the shadows. In the fourth section I reflect on my own experience in writing up a doctoral thesis in a context where mastery of the traditional impersonal style of academic writing was required and researchers were taught how to write themselves out of their own research. Continuing to reflect on my own doctoral research, in the fifth section I give specific examples of how ‘me being me and not someone else’ affected both the way knowledge was created and the kind of knowledge that was created. The sixth part is a concluding reflection where I consider the dilemmas that these issues create for researchers, particularly early-career researchers whose job prospects may depend on demonstrating mastery of traditional ways of doing things in their discipline or institution.

The sacred art of impersonal writing

“The convention of impersonal reporting remains a hallowed concept for many” (Hyland, 2001, p. 208). The arguments in favour of impersonal writing focus on three linked ideas: objectivity, credibility and disciplinarity. First, impersonal writing is thought to reflect the supposed objectivity of traditional science, where it is assumed that scientific findings represent a form of “objective truth” that exists independently of the people involved in determining and describing it. In this view, a researcher’s identity does not matter, since any investigator following the same procedure should be able to reproduce the same finding, thus demonstrating the same truth (Breuer et al., 2002). While this thinking is central to the positivist paradigm typical of the hard physical sciences, it is influential in the social sciences as well. Methodologies like randomised controlled trials that make social science appear more like physical science are considered a “gold standard” that other approaches struggle to meet (Christ, 2014). Second, it is often suggested that impersonal writing is more authoritative and persuasive, maximising the credibility of the author and thus the reader's acceptance of the message imparted. Hyland (2001) suggests that "[e]radication of the self is therefore seen as demonstrating a grasp of scholarly persuasion, as it allows the research to speak directly to the reader in an unmediated way" (p. 208), and adds that many style manuals and textbooks endorse this view. The third argument relates to the way academia is ordered according to established disciplines, and it is within these disciplines that the conventions for academic writing are established. A further argument in favour of impersonal writing, then, is the demand that "the author displays some degree of disciplinarity, that he or she demonstrates a familiarity with the rhetorical conventions and social understandings of the community" (Hyland, 2001, p. 209). This is particularly important in the case of a doctoral thesis, since presenting and defending a thesis is, in part, a ritual of initiation into the community of scholars. Showing understanding of – and willingness to conform to – the rules and conventions of that community is therefore an essential requirement.

Whatever the justification, a consequence of this impersonal writing style is that the author is required to write her-, or himself out of the work entirely. To emphasise this point, McCorkel and Myers (2003) suggest that all concerns about the personality and positionality of the researcher are "demons at the door of positivist science", and that "[t]he production of 'legitimate' knowledge begins with slamming the door shut" (p. 200).

Furthermore, the impersonal third-person writing style is facilitated by constant use of the passive voice, which means that not only is the individual researcher written out but human agency is often written out altogether (Germano, 2005). Research appears to happen, but nobody is mentioned as having done it, or indeed as having had anything to do with it. Instead of a researcher interviewing 50 people, 'fifty people were interviewed'. Instead of the researcher discovering new facts, 'it was found that . . .'. Although some modern style manuals criticise over-use of the passive voice, it remains a staple of much academic writing (Ping Alvin, 2014). Webb goes further, suggesting that writing in the third person is "a form of deception in which the thinking of scientists does not appear, and they are obliterated as active agents in the construction of knowledge" (Webb, 1992, p. 749).

To be fair, a contrary argument has been put forward, demonstrating the many stylistic tricks used by established researchers to achieve a recognisable personal voice and "stance" without wavering from the path of impersonal writing. These include the use of rhetorical devices to put forward one's position without laying claim to it in so many words; or the use of other authors' voices to show who the writer wishes to be allied with (Hyland and Sancho Guinda, 2012). However, these devices may serve the interest of the researcher more than the research. To more fully and explicitly locate the researcher in the research, we need to turn our focus to the idea of reflexivity.

The significance of reflexivity

> As qualitative researchers, we construct in our minds the natural experiences we observe and the analytic connections we make with our data. There is no "truth" external to us waiting to be discovered.
>
> (Saldaña, 2015, p. 5)

Saldaña's denunciation of scientific objectivism is now widely (though not entirely) supported in the social sciences. This gives rise to a growing tendency to value 'reflexivity', which can be understood as "[t]he process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality, as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger, 2015, p. 3). Through reflexivity, the possibility of objectivity in research is questioned, and it is recognised that the identity of the researcher does indeed affect what is found, and thus what is publicly presented as valid new knowledge. The aspects of a researcher's identity that are considered relevant include gender, race, age, sexual orientation, affiliation, beliefs, biases, preferences, personal experiences, linguistic tradition and theoretical, political and ideological stances (Berger, 2015).

Berger further suggests that the identity of the researcher can affect the way new knowledge is constructed at three stages in the research process. First the identity of the researcher may affect their access to potential research participants in the field. Some people may be more willing to consent to an interview with a person they can identify with and therefore feel more able to trust. Second, even after access is granted, participants may choose to share more accurate and detailed personal information, histories or feelings with someone they feel they can relate to. Finally, when data is gathered and analysis begins, the researcher's background and outlook affect the way she or he constructs the world, the words she/he chooses to describe it, and the lens the researcher uses to filter and make meaning from the information gathered from participants, thus shaping the conclusions of the study (Berger, 2015).

Reflexive discussion of the positionality of the researcher is now commonplace in feminist studies, ethnography and anthropology (Rose, 1997; Merriam et al., 2001), and there is a growing body of literature in childhood studies across a variety of disciplines where this approach is used, situating the researcher and drawing out the impact of positionality on creation of knowledge (Connolly, 2008; Skovdal and Abebe, 2012), exploring the dynamics of power in the research relationship (McGarry, 2016; Ravn, 2020) and considering the ethical implications (Warin, 2011; Canosa et al., 2018).

In the writing of research, the practice of reflexivity can be facilitated by writing in the first person to identify the researcher (Webb, 1992; Hyland, 2002). Though this has long been established in ethnography, feminist researchers have further highlighted the importance of first-person writing in situating the person of the researcher in accounts of research (England, 1994; Davies, 2012).

My own experience of writing a doctoral thesis

I came to doctoral study in 2012, at the age of 58, having had a long career as a practitioner and activist, first in the field of children's play, then in children's rights and participation. Having written both academic papers and NGO reports, I was fully aware of the conventions of impersonal writing and skilled in their application.

Details of the research methodology I used for my doctoral study and its full findings are beyond the remit of this chapter, and are written up elsewhere (Shier, 2016, 2018). In short, however, using a distinctive methodology known as 'Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents' (Shier, 2015), I supported and facilitated a team of child researchers from rural communities and coffee plantations in northern Nicaragua as they developed and carried out a research project using qualitative interviews to discover and then analyse children's perceptions of human rights in rural schools. The children also produced their own report, subsequently published (Shier and Niñas y Niños Investigadores de La Dalia, 2014), and made a number of public presentations of their findings and recommendations. My own further analysis generated additional findings on the development of partnerships between child and adult researchers (Shier, 2019).

As a doctoral student, I felt obliged to write up my thesis in the impersonal third person style, not because I believed in the possibility of objectivity, nor in the hope that this would give it greater credibility, but in response to the last of the three arguments earlier discussed. That is, I was hoping to demonstrate mastery of the established conventions of the academy and so gain acceptance as a full member thereof (and with it the personal prestige and enhanced employability that would come with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy). On the other hand, the nature of my research demanded researcher reflexivity in giving an account of it. And yet, to try to provide such a reflexive account while continuing to write in the impersonal third person, where I am either invisible or, at best, externalised and denatured, would lead to an incoherent and, in the end, self-defeating style of writing. Being convinced by both arguments – one in favour of a conventional impersonal style, and another against it – I faced a dilemma. The choice I finally made could be seen as a 'cop-out'. I wrote the thesis largely in the required impersonal style, but I added one section towards the start, where, using direct 'I' language, I addressed issues relating to my identity, personality, biography, beliefs and attitudes, and the impact of these on my research. Once this was done, I returned to the conventional, formal impersonal style.

How did me being me, and not someone else, affect my research?

I believe me being me was relevant to the conduct and writing up of my research in six distinct aspects: (1) my professional networks in Nicaragua; (2) my personal interest in and commitment to the 'children as researchers' approach; (3) my attitude to working with children formed through long experience and informed by human rights; (4) my long-term immersion in Nicaraguan society and culture; (5) my understanding of how my identity affects the dynamics of power in my relations with others; and (6) my being bilingual in English and Spanish. The significance of each of these is explained next.

1) Professional networks

Throughout my 11 years in Nicaragua I worked with CESESMA, an independent local organisation dedicated to supporting child workers on the region's coffee plantations and promoting and defending their rights (Shier, 2016). The professional relationships I developed during these years played a big part in making the research possible. CESESMA's support was essential to making the methodological approach viable, and the team was willing to give this support because they had known me as a colleague (a compañero) for 11 years, and had learned from experience that I could be trusted to make it work and to see it through. If someone unknown to CESESMA had approached them with a similar proposal, it is unlikely they would have received the same level of support or access.

2) Commitment to "children as researchers"

The methodology known as transformative research by children and adolescents, mentioned earlier, was not something I found in a textbook. It was no secret that I had been involved in both developing and championing this approach from its beginnings in the UK, and subsequently in Nicaragua (CESESMA, 2012; Shier, 2015). Because of this experience, when it came to writing a research proposal, I was confident that the methodology would not let me down. Though other researchers might have had similar ideas about working with child researchers, this particular research proposal was very much my own.

3) Attitude to working with children

I started my professional life as an adventure playground worker in 1976, so by the time I started work on my doctoral research in 2012, I had 36 years' continuous professional experience, combining working directly with children and training and supporting adults working with children in non-school settings. From 1993 onwards my work had been solidly rights-based, with a focus on children's participation. During this time, I had acquired a set of ideas about, and attitudes towards, children, inspired by my earlier experience as a playworker (Shier, 2017), that were helpful in planning and carrying out this research. Foremost among these is that I have learned to recognise the imposition of adult agendas on children and to find ways to resist this by paying attention to children's own concerns and interests. I have long been interested in the identification and avoidance of manipulation (Hart, 1992). Another helpful attitude is my unwavering confidence (built on experience) that child researchers will always rise to whatever challenge they decide to take on. Finally, I have learned not to make assumptions about children, or to make generalisations about what they are like, what they can or can't do or how they will or won't behave.

4) Long-term immersion in Nicaraguan society and culture

During 11 years in Nicaragua, as well as professional links, I developed a strong attachment to the country and its people, particularly the people of the rural north. When I married a Nicaraguan in 2004, my wife's family became my surrogate family, and we have a daughter who has dual Nicaraguan and Irish nationality. Spanish is the main language used in our home. Thus, though I was not fully an insider', I was far from being an outsider (Merriam et al., 2001). Living long-term in Nicaragua did not make me Nicaraguan, but it did give me a perspective that was different from that of most European or North American researchers who travel to Nicaragua to research the lives of Nicaraguan people. This was important both in enabling me to present myself as someone worth speaking openly with and in enabling me to analyse the data people shared with me in a manner sensitive to their lives and culture.

5) Sensitivity to power dynamics

Over the years I have learned to be aware of how different aspects of who I am affect the dynamics of power in my relations with others in every sphere of life. For example, I am aware of how my gender, age, skin colour, nationality, ethnic-cultural identity, class, sexual orientation, religion (or lack of), age, appearance, style of dress, way of speaking and many other factors affect how I see myself and how others, both as individuals and as members of groups, respond to and interact with me (though often these effects may be hidden, and even if they are not, I may not be sensitive enough to notice them). In the case of this research project, the differences between myself and the child research participants were starkly visible and could scarcely have been greater: To them I was a white-skinned, middle-aged, English-speaking foreign man. Since British and Irish people are rarely encountered in rural Nicaragua, white-skinned English-speaking foreigners are usually classified as "gringos", a common Latin-American term for people from the United States, which has its own meanings embedded in historic power relations. To add to this, I arrived in their community in a chauffeur-driven four-wheel-drive pick-up truck, had access to technological resources, and took the lead in the facilitation process, assisted by local Nicaraguan colleagues. If the aim was to support the 'empowerment' of local children, this could be considered an unpromising start. In such circumstances, the importance of researcher reflexivity cannot be overstated. I could not make the power imbalance go away, and to ignore or deny it would have undermined the credibility of the research (McGarry, 2016). Therefore, I had to try to facilitate the process in a way that acknowledged the power and influence I held and yet, drawing on constant reflection and reflexivity, created conditions and provided structures where the child researchers' own process of empowerment could unfold.

This was done in different ways before, during and after each workshop session. Before the session, it had to be planned and structured in such a way that the children would have space to think, discuss and debate without having to defer to the powerful positions of the adult facilitator. Co-facilitators also had to be prepared for this way of working. During the session, facilitators had to be aware of the power dynamics in the group; to be, and be perceived as, respectful listeners; and look for ways to support children in expressing views. I wanted children to see that, in this space, deference to the views of adults was not required nor particularly valued. After a session, there had to be time for reflection, both as a team of co-facilitators, and individually. I used a field journal to note my reflections after each session (Ortlipp, 2008), and the edited extracts shown here illustrate this reflexivity in action:

> It is surprising how much emphasis the children put on the right to play as a priority area. I wondered if they knew that this is an area of special interest to me and were therefore hoping to gain adult approval by exaggerating their own interest. So I went back to them to clarify why this particular issue had caught their attention, and they were very clear that it was because of their own concerns about violation of their right to play, and had nothing to do with anything I might have written or said on the issue.
>
> Esmeralda [one of the young researchers – not her real name] has said hardly anything during our workshop sessions. Discussing this with the facilitation team, my colleagues told me that, while she never said much, she did participate more in small-group sessions (where I was not involved), and that they had seen nothing to suggest that she was uninterested in, or disengaged from, the process. I decided to do nothing; that is, not to put her on the spot by pushing her to speak out in plenary sessions if she did not wish to.
>
> [In the end, the interviews Esmeralda carried out in her community were every bit as well executed and clearly written up as everyone else's, and she maintained her commitment throughout the process, including playing her part in the final public presentation without apparent shyness.]

This kind of reflexive thinking is a continual process which picks up on many small issues that may or may not get written up in the final account of the research.

6) Being bilingual

I am bilingual in English and Spanish, with English being my first language and Spanish my principal home language for the past 16 years. Because of my 11 years working with children in Nicaragua and my assimilation into a Nicaraguan family, I am not only fluent in Spanish, but am familiar with children's idioms, local expressions not found in Spanish dictionaries and local meanings that make sense only in context. Also my wife, who was born and brought up in the same region, was able to provide a second opinion where intended meanings were not immediately clear to me. The way that the complex problems of translation are dealt with (or avoided) in writing up cross-language research of this type is a significant topic in its own right (Müller, 2007; Squires, 2009). In particular, the role of 'bilingual researcher' and the capacity to carry out cross-language research without recourse to translation is an important and under-researched topic (Temple, 2006; Shklarov, 2007).

Taking all six of these aspects on board, it seemed essential that I make myself visible in the way the research was reported. To write myself out by using impersonal language, on the basis that it did not matter who had done the research, would fly in the face of the reality I was researching.

Concluding reflections

The arguments for and against impersonal academic writing discussed previously apply to all kinds of social research, whether the participants are adults or children. However, the personal experience presented here exemplifies many of the specific issues identified by those writers mentioned above who have written about reflexivity and positionality in research with children. Using Berger's idea, discussed earlier, that a researcher's identity is influential – and therefore needs to be accounted for – at three stages of the research process, my experience shows how: (a) who you are and where you are coming from are important factors in determining whether you get access to children in the first place and which children you get to talk to; (b) who you are, how you perceive the children, how they perceive you and the type of communication this enables you to establish have a critical influence on what is discussed, what you are told and thus what you bring home as 'data'; (c) back at your desk, your identity, history and culture influence your mindset (a collection of personal values, opinions, feelings and stances) as you analyse data and draw conclusions from it, and thus what you end up publicly claiming as new knowledge.

What, then, are the options available to researchers facing the dilemma I faced: needing to follow the conventions of the academy in order to get published, yet needing to locate themselves as a real person exercising reflexivity within their writing? In the literature on academic writing for students, some authorities do suggest that the judicious use of 'I' language is acceptable in certain circumstances (FESS, 2019; Rao et al., 2007), though most wisely recommend that students check the rules and norms of their own institution or department before proceeding. Use of the first person is recommended when specifically demonstrating reflection or reflexivity and may also be appropriate when describing your method – what you actually did. On the other hand, there is little to be gained from using it in a literature review or in data analysis. When writing for publication, if using 'I' language is likely to confound the expectations of your intended readership – most importantly, your editor and peer reviewers – it may be a good idea to demonstrate reflexivity by acknowledging that you know this, and giving your reasons for making such a choice, even if only in a footnote.

How much you can get away with this depends on where you hope to publish, which in turn is linked to your discipline and its conventions. Hyland (2001) analysed 240 articles in eight disciplines. He found the word 'I' did not occur at all in physics papers or other hard sciences', but was liberally scattered through the philosophy papers with a fair sprinkling also in sociology and linguistics. If you push too hard at the boundaries, however, you risk rejection or at least being asked to tone it down. This happened to me recently when I submitted a draft book chapter entirely written in the first person. The editors politely informed me that my style was not in keeping with the rest of their book and invited me to make some modifications. I agreed to cut back on the 'I' language and the chapter was accepted.

Finally, what you can get away with depends on your status in the academic world. If you are a globally respected research guru like Johnny Saldaña (Saldaña, 2012, 2015), even the top journals will give you a lot of leeway. Here is an extract from his self-reflexive position statement in a piece published in Qualitative Inquiry in 2014:

> My position? . . . Look at me: I'm a 59-year-old man with a white beard. Gay leather bear, Hispanic, a touch of Cajun (in spirit, not by blood), with a little bit of bad-ass biker in me, and a proud dash of redneck-wannabe. Overweight,

> asthmatic, a little arthritis; I don't complain much, I git by. There's other weirdo shit, but you really don't wanna know 'bout that. None of your business anyways.
>
> (Saldaña, 2014, p. 976).

For the rest of us, it is better to strike a balance: blend a touch of daring with a sound understanding of the conventions of your discipline, adding the just right amount of flexibility, humility and persistence.

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