

Who's Kidding Whom? Can We Really Talk About An Anthropology of Children?

Brian Milne

The Old Store, High Street, Brinkley, Newmarket, Suffolk CB8 0SE, United Kingdom

KEY WORDS Social Anthropology. Participant Observation. Participatory Rapid Appraisal. Anthropology of Children.

ABSTRACT This essay looks at the practical and theoretical questions that arise for social scientists who study children. The intended outcome is to provoke a thorough and resolvable debate about methods of studying children and whether we can categorically define them into their own niche in our disciplines. Here social anthropology and the discipline's most favoured research method form the core of this argument.

Within the disciplines we collectively call the social sciences, a very few specialists like myself are concerned almost entirely with the study of children and childhood. The generally accepted place of children has been psychology with branches of anthropology and sociology that examine education, language and a very few other niches in our disciplines. Economics, sociology and anthropology have generally been little interested in these "minor" topics. Even studies of family and kinship (see: Milne, 1993 and 1996a) have generally said little, if at all anything, about them. Children are almost entirely missing although they constitute a large part of the human race. Unlike my many colleagues who assume otherwise, and often need to be very thoroughly convinced that there is a need, I have consciously chosen this area for reasons that are too many to go into here but is as much an advocacy for children as a study of them. I prefer to work amongst children instead of on the "sidelines" or as a theoretician only (for instance: Jenks, 1996) as some of the best known academics tend to be. That is not intended as a critique of theory, since that is often the most basic prerequisite for any attempt to prove a fact, but the position statement of a practitioner. In that respect, whenever possible I try to

do fieldwork that brings me together with children who I am increasingly convinced should be the researchers, not I. I am one of a growing number of people who see themselves as a catalyst for bringing data together that will one day contribute to an exhaustive ethnography of childhood that will, in turn, contribute to round off our knowledge of our human species.

This paper, therefore, explores the question as to whether or not it is possible for adult ethnographers to contribute to an anthropology of children. It goes further to question the assumption that an anthropology of children is a viable proposition at all. At present research with children is undergoing an important transition as *Participatory Rapid Appraisal* (PRA) (see: Chambers, 1992) becomes increasingly popular. Previously some attempts have been made to study children as a separate control group through participant observation methods by educational anthropologists, psychologists and social anthropologists. Where PRA works it is usually because children are included within the community being studied and is, thus, part of an examination that does not separate them from the wider human environment to which they belong. It is, nonetheless, by no means a perfect data gathering method as will be explained further on. This essay is as much as anything else a call for the end of their separation from the rest of society as subjects of research.

I intended to examine and thus provoke discussion about two issues: an *anthropology of children* and *participant observation* as a means of gathering data amongst children. I shall not attempt to offer resolutions. The aim of this argument is that it should be gainfully used to begin a closer and critical examination of those issues in anthropology and other branches of the

ethnographic sciences where similar terminologies are used and where this debate quite clearly needs to be opened up. Work with children depends a great deal on the use of appropriate research methods. However, my concern is that what were once considered progressive methods have reached a plateau some time ago and are in serious need of being taken beyond existing limits. A great deal of work has taken well established methods a long way down the path of modern media to give us outstanding visual records on film. That is probably the only significant innovation of the last half century. Quantitative methods and tests that complement participatory field research have taken our knowledge of base social and economic indicators, life expectancy, health, nutrition and several other areas beyond what would have been imagined half a century ago. However, apart from the obvious advances that have come with computer and software technology, the research methods have essentially changed very little. They are merely faster versions of the old ones in most cases, thus bringing us to the same conclusions we have reached earlier, albeit slower.

Over recent decades ethnographers have undoubtedly made valuable contributions to a broad understanding of children's social worlds and peer culture. Researchers from a number of different disciplines and backgrounds, some already mentioned, many others come from educational psychology, practical nursing and childcare backgrounds, are engaged in important work. It has usually been their aim to study the world of childhood from infancy, through adolescence to the crossroads in life where childhood becomes adulthood during the liminal life stage we call youth. During that span of time, it is the life stages between the end of infancy up to early adolescence that are considered *real* childhood years. A great deal of work has been done on early childhood, particularly through nursery and elementary schools. Between ages eight and thirteen years we know relatively little because this age group has been considered the least *interesting*. From adolescence onward the foci of interest are usually youth cultures, delinquency and other "prob-

lem" areas. Using an interpretative approach to children's socialization, some researchers particularly focus on language and communicative processes whilst others concentrate on the behavioural aspects of their subjects' lives in order to explore and come to understand children's social worlds. Overall we now know far more about children as social actors and their social environments than even a decade ago. However that knowledge is based on particular *interesting* and *extraordinary* events in the development and socialization of young people.

Notwithstanding the high quality of knowledge we have accumulated, a question still arises in my mind as to how far we can still go toward a truly comprehensive understanding of childhood. To take my own discipline as an example; social anthropology has always proudly proclaimed *participant observation* as the best means of collecting the most complete information about a particular social group. It has a well established tradition within the discipline that has been well documented, tested, tried and proven reliable. It has its flaws, but by and large has been by far the most successful method of gathering comprehensive data about any group of people. The advantage of the method is that anthropologists usually go to live amongst their subjects for extended periods and often revisit the same people for several years to expand on their first data sets. In the anthropological tradition it has often been considered necessary to form very close personal ties with individuals who fulfil something akin to a mediatory role. The late Meyer Fortes (see: Fortes and Patterson, 1975), for instance, was "adopted" into a family with whom he remained very close throughout his lifetime. By this means it is possible to observe changes over more than a single generation although the initial point of contact is usually established through peer age subjects. Although others, for instance sociologists, have often spent long periods in the field and have often claimed to have used participant observation, the aim of their work is often far more specific. In that respect participatory research is often auxiliary to other methods, particularly those that measure and test their

subjects.

Participant observation as a method of data collection has been discussed within the context of ethnographic approaches to the study of childhood. Some researchers, although seldom anthropologists (who have only very recently "discovered" children), have described their data collection in some detail. Probably the best known example has been Fine and Sandstrom who use the expression in their 1988 title *Knowing Children: Participant Observation with Minors*. It is a unique publication, yet I still question not its authenticity but its feasibility. Here an important set of questions arises: since anthropologists (and all other field working social scientists at that) are adults, just how far is participant observation amongst children possible? If it is not, then what are the alternatives? Can an ethnographic study of children really be as complete without an in-depth knowledge that would normally be gained through participant observation? Are studies that rely on data gathered in such places as classrooms, through interviews and other short periods face-to-face and backed up by other "scientific" evidence, often purely empirical findings, as thorough as those gained within the "community" of childhood?

Participant observation has relied very much on the ability of the fieldworker to live within the study group. He, she or they are with their subjects 24 hours per day and for long spells of time that separate them from their normal environment. Part of the process assumes that immersion allows the researcher to see all aspects of life that are relevant to their study and often far more that is either supplementary or even superfluous. There are naturally debates about whether researchers should be seen sharing work with the people, which is, for example, to say go to the fields with agrarian people and share their economic activities, and also how far they should take part in religious or other important cultural events such as rituals, dance, music and so on. Many anthropologists have successfully fully immersed themselves in all of those things. However, work with children is much more complicated. To be able to be with a particular group of children constantly is probably only

possible where they are found in a small community where children neither attend schools nor usually appear to be out of sight for very long other than when they go home to sleep. Such groups are now few and far between and for that very reason tend to be subject of very exact studies of the whole society rather than small numbers of members of the usually isolated community. Also, since there are only small numbers of children in such isolated, traditional settings the contribution to a wider knowledge of children's lives tends to be marginal. As research with women has shown (for instance: Moore, 1988), unless women are looked at in relation to their access of means of production, particularly in urban industrial economies, their role in the state and every other aspect of life then we do not even begin to scratch the surface. Research with street children (for instance: Swart, 1990) and child labour (for instance: Reynolds, 1991) has attempted to go down those roads. Although we begin to learn a great deal, the knowledge we gain gives us only part of the whole.

Another part of this equation is also that adult and children's dynamics and world views often contrast broadly and that adult interpretations are frequently not truly representative of children's perceptions. The dynamics of being a child escapes the note of far too many researchers. Thus far, many studies have taken place in either controlled environments or what adults may consider virtual chaos: playgrounds, kindergartens and classrooms, children's homes, other institutions such as hospitals but seldom family homes or immediate neighbourhoods where children normally spend most of their lives. Very few adults have either the vitality of younger children or the frequent and natural spontaneity. Adults usually have longer attention spans combined with less patience where irregularities are concerned. This has often led to a preoccupation with behavioural aspects of children's lives rather than everything that surrounds that. Furthermore, until adolescence very few researchers and children are of similar height or physical stature so that some of the most pronounced differences are also physical.

The many rules that affect children that are made by adults will almost certainly intervene in the dynamics of adult to child interaction. Beside that, as the awareness of all forms of child abuse grows there is also increasing reluctance from adult caretakers to allow children to spend long periods alone or in groups with "strangers". This, in turn, also influences children's world views of the adult dominated environment they live in and how far they can respect or trust adults. Since the adult researcher tends to be a total stranger and children are told not to talk to people they do not know, even in the protective environment of school or institution, a shadow of doubt may remain. In those places there is, however, usually a teacher or social worker to oversee the outsider's activities. This, in turn, undermines the potential of the researcher to work with children as at least notional peers. He or she has, thus, to gain the confidence of the adult as well as children but will always remain under the scrutiny of that person who will retain control over the limits of activities within their own discretionary framework that is probably measured against their understanding of what is good for children.

The outcome is, thus, that schools, residential institutions and other locations where children are gathered tend to be the only places where participant observation is as close as anywhere to being a viable proposition. Since in those places children are usually used to adult authority, the proposition is extremely flawed. I have the deepest concern that people who choose them as research sites tend to go into their work far too quickly for the children to be able to grasp the fact that the adult researchers are attempting to work with them as at least notional equals. This is often imposed on them as a condition of their research and is part of a way of controlling or limiting the disruption classroom or institutional fieldwork may cause.

Fine and Sandstrom do not really go that far, their observation is far less participant than the title of their book may lead us to imagine. Their work takes very young children as subjects and relies very much on the facilitation of play and role-play for data.

They are participant in the sense that they are within the situation and most certainly do use observation methods to gather data. That hardly makes it participant observation in the social anthropological tradition.

Elsewhere (for instance: Hart, 1992: 17-22) we find a forerunner of what has become PRA in *participatory action research*. It assumes the researcher to be a democratic participant in the process that provides data. In this process the researcher provides advice and technical support to people he or she feels committed to working with and will eventually share analysis with. This type of research is, however, very specific because the participants identify a specific issue or problem and focus on that with little expansion away from that theme. It then examines the issue in such a way that participants thus identify and can address the matter as they see fit. In that respect it has been understood that the research has been carried out by or with the people whose problem or question the research explores. In fact, the researcher usually facilitates and mediates in the process that leads to the choice of issue. Since this type of work has been tried in schools, homes and other institutional settings, the amount of time spent with the children is relatively short. In many cases, and most particularly where children return home each day, researchers have only a few hours each day and probably five days each week as a rule. It is hardly qualifiable as total immersion and most certainly does not meet exact criteria for participant observation. Of course, this critique is not intended to invalidate the method but simply aims to point out that it only identifies a limited amount of knowledge about children's lives and that it should never be presented as though it was capable of definitive data collection potential. If there is to be a niche within the anthropological world that could come to be formally accepted as an *anthropology of children* then this would not be the means to that end.

At a time when there is a developing interest in children's participation in civil society and democratic events and processes that set out to give them a more representative role in citizenship, is it not time to address the issue

and seek new ways of studying children? The growing interest in children's participation is showing just how far their competence to make decisions and carry out complex tasks has been underestimated. It is also beginning to show how little interest there has been in children's intellectual capabilities to observe and analyze life events in the world around them.

In development and aid work where a growing awareness of children's rights has changed attitudes radically in favour of increased involvement of children, they are being used within research processes and project implementation. Some organizations are already beginning to use children as researchers within the framework of PRA. They often prove to be better at collecting data from their peers than the adults who previously carried out this work. Yet unlike adults they have only a minimal amount of training, certainly nothing as sophisticated as degree level education including quantitative and qualitative methods or analytical research methods. Whilst their task is to collect information rather than analyze it, to conform with the intention of Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* their opinion about the data they have helped collect is occasionally and increasingly being included in final processing and presentation of the children's contribution to such research. Whilst this is usually experimental and very much at the discretion of individual researchers, it begs the question: *Is this not perhaps how the raw material for ethnographies of children should be gathered in the future?*

The answer demands a great deal of certainty in the assertion of whether or not this approach goes beyond participatory action research and is able to provide a wide enough range of data in any research site to not be considered issue bound. The advantage PRA offers is that it has mostly been attempted by researchers who are in the field for reasonably lengthy periods and are most frequently examining more than one issue. The type of work described by Johnson et al. (1995); Milne (1996b); Baker (1996); Narayanasamy et al. (1996); Sapkota and Sharma (1996); or Theis

(1996) identify the problems that arise as well as the benefits. In this area of research there is often a great deal of resistance from adults. Many of those adults are themselves involved in NGO policy and practice, implementation, research and training rather than the children's family, neighbours, etc. within the communities being studied. There are differing views on how far children can be involved and which activities are pertinent. Baker, Milne, Narayanasamy and Theis all present different variations of what participation means and the range of possibilities for children's involvement. Very often these are limited to very specific tasks and tests generally regarded as suitable for children, in others they quite obviously do what adults do. Beyond these problems there are also cultural and belief based criteria that must be respected. Where children are clearly defined in a particular social framework and because of long held traditional views on childhood that do not coincide with international standards such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for instance where gender separation is based on beliefs or where age hierarchies even exclude most adults from participation in decision making processes, then even PRA is a dubious proposition. Also, whilst the researchers are usually with their subjects for extended but not lengthy periods and may use observation methods to supplement the PRA data, that is not the locus of data gathering. It rarely, if ever, paints as true a picture as participant observation.

Yet to return to the benefits of PRA it can always be convincingly claimed that the method's advocates are fast to recognize its limitations. Beyond that they are also the first to say that thus far PRA has been used for very specific tasks that meet the aims and objectives of NGO programmes rather than making in-depth anthropological type studies. In the light of its recent development, the approach has a long way to go to increase the number of methods it uses as a means of data collection and how those data are used. It has been used in some cases to substitute long term studies that would include thorough observation methods of data collection. It is almost inevitably bound by the second letter "R" in the acronym that is coming to mean

rapid more often than the *rural* it originally stood for because of the economic situation that limits most research to minimal funding, thus shorter spells in the field. Both participatory action research and PRA are very dependent on games, tests and other measuring tools that have been developed by economists, planners, psychologists and statisticians. They also tend to be best suited to small, contained field sites and therefore are valuable tools for rural research that still need to go a long way to fulfil the criteria for successful urban studies. At present PRA is going very hesitantly down that road, however, it appears that the outcome is still patchy because of the daily dispersion of city dwellers throughout their metropolis. As a consequence little time can be afforded to observation methods and more has to be given to games and tests when people are back in the community. An urban anthropology of children is a very long way off although the many excellent studies of street children already have covered at least that particular research area and give us numerous clues for how to take other topics forward.

Where PRA is used to study or include children it at least tends to fully accept the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a set of guiding principles although not as a rigid framework that designates how it should proceed. The Convention is now a benchmark that all disciplines can use to influence the progress of methods and methodological principles. The outcomes of PRA studies probably do qualify as good ethnographies in many cases but do not, nor should, they claim to be anthropology. As with what has gone before, PRA is, at best, a single contribution to the many components that may one day give us research methods with results that may eventually become an anthropology of children. It does give us examples of how we can use other disciplines to find our way into finding convincing participatory methods of working with children and may be one of the catalysts that enables us to break the mould of conservatism and take field work beyond the plateau it firmly sits on.

At this point in time we have a very long way to go before we could convincingly call

what we have collectively accumulated within our discipline a definitive anthropology of children. It is at least the foundation upon which it could be built. Where a great deal has to be done is in coming to a conclusion about whether or not we can talk about participant observation legitimately. From all that has gone before in this essay a key question arises: If we can accept that adult and children's dynamics and world views often contrast so extensively and that adult interpretations are not truly representative of children's perceptions, *then is it not above all else time to begin to use children as partners in ethnographic research?*

Participant observation would be exactly what it is intended to be because it would be carried out by age peers rather than adults imposing themselves in situations that influence the way children behave toward them, as against the way they interact with each other when grown ups are not observing them. Adult conservatism within the research community will almost inevitably stand in the way of debate and eventual resolution, yet it needs to begin somewhere. Whilst the question of using children as researchers will be heavily debated for many years to come, it is probably the only choice available in the long run. It also demands complementary research methods that make every field based study involve working *with* rather than being *about* our subjects. Of course, the most important decisions have to come from the body of social science itself. As we move into a new millennium we should allow Durkheim, Mauss, Levi-Strauss, Wax, Bourdieu, Habermas or Giddens, to name but a few of the many people who have described methods, methodologies and theories of social enquiry, to take their place in this century. Then, as we move forward into the future, we will be able to move on to new theories and practices in order to meet our obligations to human beings. That is to say, to apply our knowledge to the good of humanity in order that we can begin to find the solution to those problems that have often been the theoretical base of our work. This is naturally not a critique of those who gave us our theoretical working base but of those who have slavishly

adhered to them, thus not allowing what in their time were innovative ideas to move forward.

Whilst such high ideals may appear to deviate from the subject of this essay, it is often said that things should be done for future generations. The starting point of each generation is childhood about which we know relatively little as yet and where we stand to make those breakthroughs that may take us down the path to those greater objectives. If research can tell us what children do and think, identify their needs and give them a far more appropriate place in the greater scheme of things and much more beyond, then it is almost certain we could justifiably talk about an anthropology of children. In its turn that would be the last component in the whole picture of our race. As regards the question of participant observation, that is unquestionably the first challenge to be fought through and, I hope, resolved. I think it is likely to be a long and tortuous debate. This essay throws down the gauntlet and asks that it will now proceed. The first step is that those who think that work with children does not need either to go down this road or indeed to go any further at all stop kidding themselves. Who has been kidding whom? In my view they have been kidding themselves. I believe they are wrong.

REFERENCES

- Baker, R. 1996. "PRA with Street Children in Nepal," *PLA Notes*, 25: 56-60.
- Chambers, R. 1992. *Rural Appraisal: Rapid, relaxed and participatory*, IDS Discussion Paper 311. Brighton: IDS.
- Fine, G.A. and K.L. Sandstrom. 1988. *Knowing Children: Participant Observation with Minors*. London: Sage.
- Fortes, M. and S. Patterson. (eds.). 1975. *Studies in African Social Anthropology*. New York: Academic Press.
- Hart, R. 1992. *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Innocenti Essay No. 4. Florence: UNICEF ICDC.
- Jenks, C. 1996. *Childhood*. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, V., J. Hill. and E. Ivan-Smith. 1995. *Listening to Smaller Voices: Children in an Environment of Change*. London: ActionAid.
- Milne, B. 1993. "Family Disintegration: The Family as a Fading Focal Point," in *Childhood*, 1 (3): 156-64.
- . 1996a. "Family and Community Studies and the Missing Children: Finding a Place in Contemporary Society," in G. Pfeffer and D.K. Behera (eds.), *Contemporary Society, Childhood and Complex Order*. New Delhi: Manak.
- . 1996b. "Children's Rights and the Changing Face of Work in the Field," *PLA Notes*, 25: 38-42.
- Moore, H.L. 1988. *Feminism and Anthropology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Narayanasamy, N. et al. 1996. "Whither Children's Hour? An Experimental PRA among Labouring Rural Children," *PLA Notes*, 25: 65-69.
- Reynolds, P. 1991. *Dance Civet Cat: Child Labour in the Zambezi Valley*. London: Zed Books.
- Sapkota, P. and J. Sharma. 1996. "Participatory Interactions with Street Children in Nepal," *PLA Notes*, 25: 61-64.
- Swart, J. 1990. *Malunde: The Street Children of Hillbrow*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Theis, J. 1996. "Children and Participatory Appraisals: Experiences from Vietnam," *PLA Notes*, 25: 70-72.