

Researching Children: Implications of a special population

Dr. Susanne Vogl

Department of Sociology & Department of Education

A-1090 Wien

susanne.vogl@univie.ac.at

Outline

- Researching children
- Research Methods: Interviews and focus groups
- Children's skills and competencies
- Practicalities in planning and conducting interview research



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Researching Children

Researching children



- Paradigm shift during the last century: *New childhood studies*
 - Children are no longer *adults-to-be* BUT *actors in their own right*
 - Research *with* children instead of *on* them (Christensen and James 2008) *for* and *with* children (e.g. Christensen and Prout 2002; Mayall 2002; Punch 2002; Cairns 2001; Clark and Moss 2001).
- Main issue: capturing children's perspectives
- Child respondents challenge social scientists because their verbal, interactive, and cognitive skills are different from those of adults and vary among children (Vogl 2014).
- **BUT:** Young children are often far more competent in attempting to understand and adapt to their world than believed.

Researching Children



Methodological approaches:

- Mostly classic methods but also modifications
- Development of specific methods is rare

! Consider !

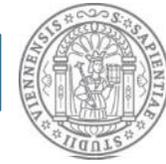
- Research approaches are perspectives
- Research and researchers are adult centered
- Generational hierarchy
- Child-typical communication – oral or written interviews are adult centered



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Research Methods: Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews as Research Method



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- Interviews appear to be simple, also due to the similarity to everyday conversations
- Idea: (verbal) Stimulus → (verbal) Reaction

! But !

- What is communicated is not only an expression of attitudes and so on, but is a result of the dynamic of the situation
- Interviews are interactions
- Interviews require simultaneously handling multiple tasks:
 - Language production and comprehension
 - Social and cognitive skills

Interview Methods



- Level of standardization
- Communication media
 - Familiarity with medium
 - Acceptance of silences
 - ‘Locus of control’
 - Communication channels
- Interviewer effects
- Synchronous or asynchronous communication

Focus Groups

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore topics and generate hypotheses• Wider spectrum of opinions• External validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication process as a potential threat to validity• Group dynamics can inhibit communication• Group dynamics can become more important than content
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Interaction among participants as strength and weakness– Potential limits to focus groups with children: Specific skills in self-promotion, narration and argumentation together with cooperativeness	

Children's Skills and Competencies

Children's Skills



- Verbal, interactive und cognitive skills determine
 - » potential insights,
 - » applicability and
 - » conduct of data collection methods
- Skills change across childhood
- Variability of skills within one age group
- Main developmental achievement: ability of perspective taking (+ Decentration of thinking)
 - » Increases communicative competence because previous knowledge, interests, expectations and motives can be estimated
 - (verbal) communication is more detailed and easier to follow

Verbal skills

	4-6 years	6-8 years	8-10 years	10-12 years
Verbal skills	Idiosyncratic use of language		Expressions of time and frequencies sporadic little reliable	
	Low reliability of expressions of frequency and quantity			
	Gaps in vocabulary		Verbalizing train of thoughts automatic	Most heterogeneous group
Communication skills	<p>DL (5, male): <i>sometimes always in the evenings</i> DL (5, male): <i>sometimes often</i> TH (7, male): <i>over-yesterday</i> NL (9, female): <i>sometimes always</i> AH (9, female): <i>Mh, I don't know. They all taste good. Only some don't.</i></p>		cited, relevant, structured explanations	Unsolicited and reproducible explanations; Examples for illustration

Source: Vogl 2014; 2015

Verbal skills

	4-6 years	6-8 years	8-10 years	10-12 years
Verbal skills	Idiosyncratic use of language		Expressions of time and frequencies sporadic little reliable	
	Low reliability of expressions of frequency and quantity			
	Gaps in vocabulary	Gaps in vocabulary overcome independently	Verbalizing abstract train of thoughts problematic	Most heterogeneous group
	Literal understanding of language vs. unspecified use			
Communicative skills	Explanations not always reproducible (lacking decentration)		Unsolicited, relevant, structured explanations	Unsolicited and reproducible explanations; Examples for illustration

Source: Vogl 2014; 2015

Verbal skills

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Verbal skills	Idiosyncratic use of language		Gaps in vocabulary overcome independently	abstract train of thoughts problematic	most heterogeneous group
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	Gaps in vocabulary				
	Literal understanding of language vs. unspecified use				
Communicative skills	Explanations not always reproducible (lacking decentration)		Unsolicited, relevant, structured explanations	Unsolicited and reproducible explanations; Examples for illustration	

TH (7, male):

TH: *And then (...) sticks.*

I: *What kind of sticks? (.) Pretzel sticks?*

TH: *No, I mean (.) it can be pretzel sticks or something to drink that kind of sticks.*

I: *A stick to drink?*

TH: *Yes, such a erm pipe-stem.*

I: *Ah.*

TH: *You just need to put it in your mouth...*

I: *Ah a straw?*

TH: *Yes.*

Source: Vogl 2014; 2015

Verbal skills

	4-6 years	6-8 years	8-10 years	10-12 years
Verbal skills	Idiosyncratic use of	<p>AM (5, female):</p> <p><i>I: You don't have a cold anymore?</i></p> <p><i>AM: Uh-uh.</i></p> <p><i>I: We are glad about that. And how was nursery today?</i></p> <p><i>AM: I did not go to nursery.</i></p> <p><i>I: Really? Why did you not go to nursery?</i></p> <p><i>AM: Because I have a fever.</i></p> <p><i>I: Oh, so you are being ill?</i></p> <p><i>AM: Yes.</i></p>		
	Low reliability of ex frequency an			
	Gaps in vocabulary			
	Literal understanding of language vs. unspecified use			
Communicative skills			structured explanations	explanations; Examples for illustration

“favorite series” was synonymous with “favorite episode” as well as “favorite film” and “favorite tape.”

Interactive skills

	4-6 years	6-8 years	8-10 years	10-12 years
Decentration	Development of empathy	Reflections about self, others and relations to others; social comparisons	Self-awareness; Clear progress in decentration	Social desirability and impression management
	Developing perspective taking			
	Cooperation and compromise		Coordination of discussion in peer group	
	More social-emotional behaviour		More expressions of opinions Better emotional self-control	

Source: Vogl 2014; 2015

Interactive sk

	4-6 years		
Decentration	Development of empathy	sen, others relations to others, social comparisons	progress in decentration and impression management
	Developing perspective taking		
	Cooperation and compromise		

VS (11, female)
I: What do you think they get there?
VS: ((looks for cues on the picture)) erm, maybe (.) lollies
I: Lollies, mh.
VS: And then Harbio (...) chocolate ((looks to interviewer and smiles as if chocolate is something forbidden)) (.....) erm, maybe something to nibble.
I: Uh-huh, (.) something specific?
VS: Erm, (...) crisps ((looks inquiringly to interviewer))

DL (5, male)
I: Do you think those two enjoy shopping without their mum?
DL: Yes.
I: Yes? Why?
DL: I don't know.
I: What is it they might like?
DL: Because they can take what they like.

JR (9, female)
I: Can you imagine what they would put into their shopping trolley now?
JR: ((raises shoulders)) Maybe not necessarily what their mum wants. Maybe sweets or something like that.
I: uh-huh.
JR: And (..) maybe fruit a few pieces, but not too much.

Interactive skills

	4-6 years	6-8 years
Decentration	Development of empathy	Reflection on self, other relations social comparison
	Developing perspective taking	
	Cooperation and compromise	Coordination of discussion in peer group
	More social-emotional behaviour	More expressions of opinions Better emotional self-control

JF (7, male): If you want to know everything that, if you want to know what we like then you always have to watch children's stuff, right? ((smiles))

Source: Vogl 2014; 2015

Cognitive skills

	4-6 years	6-8 years	8-10 years	10-12 years
Logical thinking and reasoning	Idiosyncratic relation, causal relation with variable classification	Trial and error analogies; Increasing understanding for relational similarities		Analogies and relational similarities
		Beginning of logical thinking and reasoning	Meta-cognition Multidimensional thinking	More flexible and faster thinking; Hypothetical and abstract thinking
		Reproducible reasoning	Generalisations	Differentiations

Source: Vogl 2014; 2015

Cognitive s

AS (5, female)
I: Could milk go with Nutella?
 AS: No.
I: Uh-huh. Why not?
 AS: Because that is white and Nutella is brown.

	4-6 years	7-9 years	8-10 years	10-12 years
Logical thinking	Idiosyncratic relation, causal relation with variable classification	Increase		

EF (7, female)
I: Uh-huh. Why is that not very healthy for the teeth?
 EF: Because (.) that is sweet.
I: Uh-huh.
 EF: And it is likely that there is sugar in it.
I: Yes. Likely. Right.
 EF: And sugar destroys the teeth.

FM (11, male)
FM: They somehow created Nutella, the athletes.
I: Uh-huh. Do you think that athletes really eat Nutella or is this only in the ad?
 FM: I think that they do eat Nutella, because for Kuranyi and Hinkel it says in Bravo-Sport that they eat a lot of Nutella.
I: Uh-huh.
 FM: I think they do. Except for if it was a lie, but I don't think so.
I: Uh-huh. Where do you think could be the connection? Why do athletes like eating Nutella? What could be...?
 FM: Hm, because they might like it best or...
I: Uh-huh.

Practical Implications

Practical implications

		Age of Respondents			
		5	7	9	11
Language	Words used related to experiences				
	Familiar expressions				
	NO complicated words, expressions or sentences				
	NO figures of speech, irony & metaphors				
	<i>! Equivalence of meaning !</i>				
Questions	NO question on frequencies				
	NO questions on explanations		Questions on explanations (well-known procedures)		Questions on explanations
	NO tasks requiring logical thinking and reasoning		Tasks implying logical thinking and reasoning		
			Questions implying self-awareness		

Practical Advice for Focus Groups

- A preliminary meeting before the focus group is advisable.
- Group size should not exceed eight.
- For the same amount of tasks younger children need more time.
- Playful elements are helpful.
- Group tasks are more adequate for younger participants, discussions for older ones.
- Under the age of 12 groups of friends are advisable.
- From the age of 13 onwards groups should be separated for boys and girls.

Challenges

- (Informed) consent/assent by children and guardians
- Limited attention span
- Language use and production
- Frequencies, distances, quantities, and temporal references can be problematic
- Insecurities and shyness

Conclusion: Children as Respondents

- Children's skills and the research question determine the applicability of interviews.
- Non-standardised approaches are more flexible and more suitable for younger children.
- Verbal utterances are not necessarily more valid than nonverbal.

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