
PROMOTING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH: REFLECTION OF A PAST STUDY

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini merupakan refleksi dari penelitian eksperimen yang telah dilakukan oleh penulis sebelumnya. Penelitian eksperimen seringkali tidak mengindahkan partisipasi anak, meskipun hal ini bertentangan dengan prinsip CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child). Refleksi terhadap penelitian eksperimen yang telah dilakukan oleh penulis ini akan mencoba melihat celah-celah dalam penelitian eksperimen yang dapat diperbaiki, sehingga membuka peluang bagi peningkatan partisipasi anak dalam proses penelitian metode eksperimental.

Kata Kunci: partisipasi anak, penelitian eksperimen

Abstract

This essay is a reflection of a past experimental study on children. Experimental studies often do not attention to children's participation stated as one of the principles of the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child). Therefore, this reflection will try to see what aspects of experimental research can enhance children's participation.

Keywords: children's participation, experimental research

The CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child) emphasizes the binding obligation of national governments in ensuring that the CRC principles are applied in national programming and policies (Save the Children, 2001). Though the government holds the main responsibility, other stakeholders should also be aware of applying the CRC within their own activities. As an important part of civil society, researchers interested in conducting research with children have the power to promote the implementation of the CRC through their work by making more space for children to participate.

Within the framework of the CRC, researchers can give more space for children's participation by keeping in mind the following summary of article 12 and 13 made by UNICEF: "1) *The child has the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken in to account in any manner or procedure affecting*

the child, 2) The child has the right to express his or her views, obtain information, make ideas or information known, regardless of frontiers (UNICEF1).

Though children's participation in research can range from formulating their own research problem until disseminating their findings (Alderson, 2000), this writing will only focus on possible ways in which adult designed research can give more room for children to participate. Participation is seen to be important in research because it gives the researcher a better understanding of the issue, as children are the experts of their own world (Punch, 2002). It also enhances children's communication skills, builds their self-esteem, and gives them an opportunity to be heard, (Miller, 1997).

The quotation of article 12 and 13 of the CRC above needs further exploration to put it into practice, especially concerning the levels

of participation a child can be involved in during experimental research in social science. Deriving from a natural science method, experimental research itself is a research that puts power in the hands of the researcher in order to manipulate the variables involved. In the social science world, the field of Psychology seems to have frequently adopted this method in many instances to try to understand children's behavior. Using Hart's ladder of children's participation (PLA Notes, 1996), I conclude that experimental research mainly deals with the lowest level of participation (manipulation). This can be seen in the definition of manipulation, which is a state where "*children do or say what adults wish them to, but with no real understanding of the issues*." (Miller 1997).

To illustrate how manipulation works within an experimental research, one can read classic studies in Psychology such as *Scaring Little Albert* or *Bobo Dolls and Aggression* (Goodwin, 1998).² These studies show how experimenters have full power to manipulate their research subjects without the subjects fully understanding the issue dealt in the research. Even though the words 'subjects' is used in experimental research to refer to the 'object' of study, it has a whole different meaning compared to the term 'subjects' as 'agents'. Given the nature of experimental research itself, is it possible to make space for a meaningful participation by the research subjects in experimental research?

Experimental Research with Children

I believe that in some cases, experimental methods can actually give more space for the subjects to participate. Grover (2004) described that an experimental research *combined* with phenomenological methods can be used to have a better understanding of the subjects' world³ (thus promoting participation of research subjects), and at the same time provide predictive power of the research. I will draw upon my own research experience using

experimental methods with children to explore what aspects of that research could have been done differently and what new things can be done in order to better incorporate children into the research. I will reflect upon the research that I carried out for my undergraduate thesis⁴, which aimed at studying what method (bargaining or rationalization) would be more effective in obtaining children's compliance towards rules. In this experimental study, I formed three groups of children aged 11-12 years old that would be my research 'subjects'. This age range was chosen because according to Piaget's theory on cognitive development, this is the age where the child's capability in abstract thinking develops (Kail, 2000). I considered that abstract thinking is important in both rationalization and bargaining, because it gives a foundation for each child to analyze future consequences and motivation of the person he or she is interacting with.

In this research, each group consisted of five children that had the highest score of disobedience (for not doing their homework) within a time period of one week. Two groups of children were used as experimental groups, while only one was used as a control group. The experimental groups were given a training session for five days, where each group listened to three stories in which the character in the story had conducted an act of disobedience to certain rules. The bargaining group was asked to imagine themselves being in the same situation as the character in the story and bargain with the researcher upon what form of punishment they would have liked to receive for that particular act of disobedience. The rationalization group was given the same story, asked to imagine themselves in the same situation, and at the end the researcher tried to argue rationally why it is important to stick to the adult made rules. The third group did not receive any treatment at all. On the last day of the training session, the bargaining group was asked to negotiate on what

punishment they thought they deserved if they did not finish their homework. The rationalization group was only given the argument by the researcher on the importance of finishing homework. The effectiveness of the treatment was to see whether there has been a change in subjects' behavior towards homework (they finished their homework more often than before). The conclusion of this research was that rationalization was more effective in producing obedience compared to bargaining or no intervention at all.

The Way Forward

Though Grover (2004) suggested the combination of experimental and phenomenological methods to shed more light into a researcher's understanding of the child's world and give more power for the child to participate, I would not go that far to reflect upon my past study. I would like to start with changes in small aspects within different levels of the experimental research itself.

Formulating the Problem

Though I acknowledge the importance of authority figures in guiding children's behavior, I would have changed my dependent variable in the research. The word 'obedience' gives an impression that what adults say is always right and children should obey towards adults' demands, while my basic intention was just to raise awareness that treating children in a better way is important for the child's development. Children should not only be told what to do, but they should be informed on why they are demanded to do so and what the consequences of that action will be. They should also be given the chance to express themselves and be involved in certain decision-making processes.

Rationalization would help children understand why certain rules are important, while bargaining gives a wider opportunity for

children to negotiate their wills and wants. Perhaps a more appropriate term for my dependent variable would have been *commitment*, where commitment would be defined as obedience towards rules that were formulated by both adults and children together. Instead of separating rationalization and bargaining as two different strategies in influencing children, it would have been better to see whether bargaining could follow rationalization. In this case, a child can first be *informed* on why a certain behavior is needed and what the consequences are for conducting (or not conducting) a particular behavior. This would be in line with the right of the child to acquire information (article 12 CRC). The next level would be bargaining, where the child can negotiate with the adult figure the consequences of misbehaving through the negotiated form of punishment that they had both agreed upon. The method of bargaining itself will give the child an opportunity for expression and be involved in decision making that concerns his or her own well being. Therefore, I could have tried to compare the commitment (not obedience) of a child to stick to a particular rule before and after intervention.

Carrying out the Research

a. Asking for children's consent

According to Alderson (2000), one of the obstacles in realizing children's participation is adult's assumption that as long as the researcher has the teacher or parents' consent, it is all right to carry on with the research. The children's own approval of participating in the research is not considered. The same assumption was present during the time of research. I sent a letter of consent for both the children's teacher (because the experiment was conducted in the school) and parents. I did not take into account that the children might not have wanted to

participate at all in the research project. For example, I have come to know later on from the teacher that one of the students is a child worker. After school he would be in the intersections singing songs in search of income. I should have considered that the training might have prevented him to work. Therefore, asking for his consent to join the training sessions should have crossed my mind as being crucial for his well being. The parents' and teachers' consent is of course important, but I would not have 'imposed' the training session if the child refused to do so.

b. Building Rapport

In any psychological intervention, building rapport with the subjects is always the main foundation for further intervention. I asked support from two assistants to carry out the training sessions because it was done simultaneously. I had the task of observing the sessions from a door connecting the two classes where the sessions were carried out. I asked the assistants to build rapport with the children through the ice breaking session during the first day of the training. The children were asked to draw a picture of their family and when they were finished, the group formed a circle to start introducing themselves and their family to the group. Before any of the children started introducing their family, the assistants presented the story of their family first. By doing so, I was hoping that they would see that the assistants were open to them, and in that way they would trust the assistants enough to do the same.

However, building rapport was not an easy task. Punch (2002) mentioned that adults sometimes lack the skills to build rapport. However, I think that the major constraint to rapport building in my study was time (one session only lasted for one hour). As mentioned by

Hinton (2000), building rapport is a slow process. In her ethnographic study, her rapport with Bhutanese refugee children was built on informal meetings with children that did not take a day or two (let alone one hour!). What I could have done was to give more time to interact with the children, where the assistants and I could have gone to the school and interact informally with the children instead of constraining the time of rapport building to one session in the training. Of course, I would also have to be realistic concerning the time because I would not have been able to have as much time in my hands as ethnographic researchers to build rapport in an experimental research.

Another aspect of gaining trust from the children is to adequately provide them with the information about the research that they will be participating in. Though they were given the information that the training is intended to build their capacity in communicating during group sessions, I did not give the full picture. As experimental studies do involve a bit of manipulation, it would be impossible to provide them with the full description of the research. It would also cause bias, in a way that the children may act according to what is being expected of them (in this case to do their homework). However, I would have given them more information, such as what I intend to do with the research, how they will benefit or perhaps not from joining the sessions, etc.

c. Hierarchy within the Group

Because there was not enough time to build rapport, the ice breaking session was not successful in making the children comfortable with the assistant. Out of ten children that participated in the training

sessions, only three were responding to the questions the assistants asked. Most of them had to be pointed by the assistants to get them speaking. It was almost disappointing to see how the children that were brave enough to speak usually gave the wrong answers to the assistants. The questions asked were based on the story that was presented to them, so objective answers were possible. The children that kept silent and had to be called on to answer a question usually gave the right answer. Therefore, I should have realized that there was a hierarchy within the group. I am sure that the children in the bargaining group who voluntarily answered the questions had a good foundation for negotiating with the assistant, but by excluding the majority. By recognizing this, I could have asked the assistant to probe the silent ones more and give them more rewards when they answered (by praising their courage, for example).

d. Research Setting

Punch (2002) pointed out that research settings would have an effect on how children might participate. Adult controlled settings (like schools) would make children uncomfortable to express themselves. In order to avoid this, I could have asked the children where they would like the training to take place. We might not have to go very far from the school, but it could have been a place where the children felt that they had some control over the environment.

Data Analysis

Feedback from the Children

Data analysis from adult designed research such as this one means that the analysis is in the hands of the researcher.

However, I should have asked the children for feedback on the conclusion that I made. By asking feedback from children, the children are consulted on matters concerning them. As Miller (1997) stated “*any attempt to promote children’s participation will involve consultation too*”. In relation to consultation, I could ask them whether it was true that rationalization would motivate them to a greater extent to finish their homework compared to bargaining. Perhaps my conclusion was wrong, without me knowing it. To make matters worse, I may have come up with the wrong conclusion without consulting the children who understand their world, perhaps even much more than myself!

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(Footnotes)

¹ No statement of publication year

² Albert was conditioned to be scared by making an association between a loud noise and a rat. Each time the rat appeared, a loud noise that scared the boy was presented. Soon afterwards, the boy was afraid of the rat even though no loud noise was present. The Bobo Doll experiment tries to see how boys imitate the act of aggression by watching an adult aggressing a Bobo Doll, a film of an adult aggressing a Bobo Doll, and a cartoon character aggressing a Bobo Doll.

³ In experimental methods, subjectivity (such as subjective bias) is usually considered to be contamination.

⁴ The title of the thesis is "*The Effectiveness of Rational Influence Tactics towards Child Obedience*" which I conducted in 1999.