

Interviewing children and young people for research

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In a climate promoting “children’s voices,” social workers need to be even more critically conscious of contested and nuanced discourses associated with children’s rights, child protection, children’s voices and child-centred practices. The ethics of what we do and why we do it remain central to our practice. We need to deeply understand the politics of evidence to make sure we are not hood-winked into implementing fashionable and powerful ideas instead of critically appraising them first (Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014). With a decade of experience as a specialist child interviewer (also known as a forensic or specialist child witness interviewer), reviewing this book offered an opportunity to reflect on my social work practice in general, research, and of course the interviewing of children and young people. In addition, this book helped uncomfortably illuminate how organisational narratives have insidiously influenced my thinking about children and young people at various stages of my 20+ years of social work. In hindsight it was this sneakily invisible and uncomfortable “rub” that caused me much angst and was the topic of many external (not internal!) supervision discussions.

So am I deemed an expert in the interviewing of children? This very question has been debated in courts of law, with judges and lawyers applying my experience against a legalese benchmark of what constitutes an expert. On some occasions I was deemed an expert, on others my practical experience and social worker status did not meet the professional threshold of, say, a psychologist. While I don’t like referring to myself as an

expert of any type, what I am is someone with a lot of applied experience talking with children and young people about complex experiences. My experience tells me that children and young people can and do provide accurate and valuable information. This is of course dependent on how, what and why they are being asked. After all, no research is neutral.

O’Reilly and Dogra incorporate both academic knowledge and applied experiences into the guide. They acknowledge that much of what is known practically about interviewing children and young people comes from other contexts such as clinical and forensic settings and many of the skills from these contexts are transferable to the research setting. The book provides a very general overview of the core skills of a child interviewer. Interestingly, suggestions about specialist training relate to data analysis methods with one brief comment towards the end of the book (p. 196) suggesting researchers may like to undertake specific training in interviewing children.

This book is a guide to help develop a broad perspective on interviewing children and young people for research purposes. The 11 chapters take the reader through the entire process of undertaking a qualitative research project with interviewing as the primary method of data collection. Areas for further training for researchers are also identified. Australian practitioner, Katherine Thompson (2020), has recently reviewed this book. Interested readers are encouraged to read her review for an additional perspective.

Overall, the book was easy to read. It highlighted that interviewing children and young people requires considerable skill and self-awareness and that researchers must carefully attend to the ethical framework of their research question, methodology and methods. There is also a comprehensive references section. The chapter layout is clear and logical, starting with learning outcomes, providing examples, activities and vignettes with author comments to help deepen the reader's learning. Specific references at the end of each chapter easily direct the reader to additional information. Chapter 4 focuses on different ways of conducting interviews. This chapter is useful stand-alone reading for social workers as the 2020 worldwide pandemic sees many practitioners having to communicate with children and young people in different ways. In addition, Chapter 8, on ethical issues, while focusing on the research setting might also help social workers consider wider notions of ethical practice. Throughout the book, complex ideas were simplified to help guide the reader through the research process rather than to engage in academic debate. Helpfully, the authors comment on the "simplification" process so the reader is again reminded of the purpose of the book—to keep it accessible and practical. Possibly because O'Reilly and Dogra attempted to cover lots of information a very general way, I found chapters 7 and 9 to be less cohesive than other chapters, and felt that issues relating to culture and diversity were given only a cursory glimpse. The book might have been made more visually appealing with coloured text boxes to provide some visual stimulation for the reader. Question examples provided throughout the book using the words "I wonder if ..." felt slightly leading and I would recommend caution using such a phrase when interviewing children and young people within a research setting—and more generally.

This book would support social workers and academics to better understand

the many issues related to including children and young people in research. In addition, the text provides some useful opportunities, at quite a general level, to integrate knowledge across a number of domains, for example child development and ethical practice. Social workers may find reading this text helps their overall understanding of a qualitative research process more than some standard social science research methods textbooks. Pages 197–199 provide social work academics with a good framework to incorporate reflective and integrated learning into a research paper. As with any overseas texts, readers within Aotearoa will need to apply professional discretion as to how particular ideas and/or methods are useful for our context here. I wondered whether there are opportunities for social workers with experience talking to children and young people to be co-opted by researchers to help design interview schedules and/or conduct the research interviews. This is one way that social workers can contribute to research and demonstrate that the so-called "soft skills" of our profession are, in fact, highly sought after in the midst of the swirling rhetoric.

My hope is that more social workers will carry out, or be involved in, research involving children and young people and, in doing so, further challenge their own assumptions and biases that a research process helps develop. This book, while a guide for carrying out qualitative research with children and young people, also provides some moments for critical reflection. As mentioned above, this book invoked a deeper response in me than I had imagined. Featherstone et al. encapsulate this for me well by stating "... the politics of evidence has reached a high-water mark, only what 'works' gets funded and the adjudications on the efficacy of various approaches are affected by hierarchies of evidence and easily colonised by moral and ideological projects" (Featherstone et al., 2014, p. 15).

References

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