

# Learning to listen

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FROM 1971 to 1978 I lived in India in that magical time before the country's coming of age in a globalized world. Bim Bissell drew me into the sphere of the Playhouse Schools and crafted a role for me although I was a raw graduate and busy making children to attend her schools. She gave me the grand title of Special Advisor to the Playhouse Schools and fulfilling my part, I learnt more than I gave, as perhaps is always the case when a role is prefaced by the word 'special'. I spent some hours in the school watching, listening, playing with, and joining in the activities of teachers and pupils.

With a notebook in hand, I would catch a child's reply to a question; request for a piece of information; response to a suggestion; an opinion on a story; offer of a joke; play on a friend's thought and I would take hold of it and note it down. There were always samples of such originality, feeling, exploration, and clear articulation in their expressions. Of course I heard, in their talk, plain nonsense too – the speaking of words for the sake of their sounds, or to annoy the teacher, or to bully a fellow pupil, or to express distress or discontent. Sometimes the children were silent and, like Bartleby,\* they 'preferred not' to speak.

I paid attention to the teachers in class as they interacted with the children. I attended to their speech, gestures, eye contact, movement, and reactions to mood, desire, fear and laughter. I observed their responses to signs of boredom, tiredness, hunger and discomfort. Together, we went over their lessons, as they were planned, executed, reflected on and integrated into coherent maps of action. We discussed each stage and arrived at fresh approaches, ideas, and elaborations.

The teachers were under scrutiny (and none seemed to mind) as they interacted with their colleagues. I noted the effect of their presence as they moved around the school terrain and how they maintained the order of things. I was interested in the ways in which they expressed their intentions, in their demeanour, presentation of self, interactions with parents and caretakers, treatment of support staff, and their relationships with the principal. One teacher was having a hard time at home, and I remember how bravely she set the troubles aside in her manner and comportment at school.

My effect on the teachers and children was minimal but I was interested in the positive effect that close attention to people's actions and concern with their interests, can have in stimulating greater efforts and increasing confidence and a sense of value. A few of the teachers wrote up their lessons and stories and published them as books.

I can hear the reader whisper to himself or herself, 'Ah, the luxury of nostalgia; the indulgence in romantic notions of childhood.' Since leaving India in 1978, I have done research with children in Africa and know well levels of oppression, poverty, loss, pain and illness that have left in me little room for either nostalgia or romanticism. I remain impressed by the quality of the Playhouse Schools.

I shall now talk about the kind of research with children that I went on to do after I had left

India much the richer for my experience at the Playhouse Schools. Two of my four daughters (three of whom were born in Delhi), Talitha and Portia, were pupils at the school near Lodi Gardens and two, Talitha and Sabaa, returned much later to teach there. As I write, I am in my imagination addressing past pupils, telling them what I learnt from them.

**M**y studies in the ethnography of childhood explore two facets. I set out to record children's experiences in the social, political, economic and moral contexts of the societies in which they live, and to discover what conceptions of childhood adults hold and how they shape the way children are regarded and treated. I have tried to show how the two aspects inform one another and how, if the first is ignored, children's lives can be made more difficult.

Let us remind ourselves that conceptions of childhood vary across societies, that every society recognizes differences between adults and children, acknowledges the need to protect children and attend to their particular potential and vulnerabilities, and that every society uses childhood (and use often becomes abuse). But beyond these generalities, societies differ in their ideas about childhood.

For example, they may differ in their notions of the origin of children, i.e. their connections to the supernatural, the role of fate or chance in their development, the origin of gifts or flaws in individuals, the inheritance of talents or evil potentials, the parental role in shaping the child, dangers that may be inherent in relationships, the culpability of the young wrong-doer, or of growth patterns, identity, and obligations. The ethnographic question that concerns me, in particular is: how do we track the differences from the child's point of view?

**S**ince leaving India, I have worked as an anthropologist with children and youth in Zimbabwe and South Africa and have done fieldwork on the cognitive development of young children living in an informal settlement under apartheid oppression; healers' conceptions of childhood and their training of children to become healers in Musami, Zimbabwe; child labour in the Zambezi Valley; resistance fighters who had been released from Robben Island and other prisons in South Africa after the release of Nelson Mandela; and on the ethnography of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In each study, the basic premise was that the young were my informants and that together we would place their beliefs and practices in the context of their social, political, economic and moral experiences. My intention was to partner them in documenting their thoughts and activities and to create ways to invite them to express their views and understanding by devising situations that framed our engagement and allowed for the free flow of reflection and response. In part, I drew on the methods I used at the Playhouse Schools.

Curiously, much of what I learnt about children refutes adult versions of the norms, conventions, habits and patterns of children's activities, that is, my understanding as informed by children is frequently at odds with those of adults. For example, Tonga parents in the Zambezi Valley told me how much labour they expected from their children in all agricultural tasks for production of a crop. I tracked the children's labour using a wide range of methods over a year and matched the parents' expectations to their receipt of labour and found that much more work

was received from children than had been anticipated. Indeed, children under the age of sixteen contributed 40 per cent for all labour including the work of fathers, mothers and other kin.

The point here is that children's labour is usually estimated on the basis of interviews with their fathers and important policy decisions at national and international levels are made in relation to a technique – interviews with household heads – that is unreliable as adults are not necessarily conscious of the full extent of children's contributions.

**I**n 1982 and 1983, I worked with *N'anga* (traditional healers) among Zezuru people in Zimbabwe. I was interested in their conceptions of childhood and their treatment of children, and in the manner in which they trained children as acolytes. One aspect of the study entailed an investigation of children's knowledge of plants that are used for medicinal and ritual purposes. I set out to describe children's practical interests in the business of healing and to elicit their ideas about healing and the origins of disease. Zezuru adults commonly said that healers are not trained but are informed by spirits and by their dreams. They also said that children are not taught *materia medica* and that children know nothing about witchcraft (evil) and nor are they told about it.

Over a period of two years, I observed children as patients and acolyte. I walked in bush with them and with healers as they collected herbs for medicines. In the process of working with them, I recorded their dreams, watched children as they listened to adults' discourse about evil, illness, death, moral responsibility, etc., interviewed them and devised an exercise to test the extent of their knowledge of medicine. There are over 2,000 species of plants of which healers in that area use 500 as ingredients in their medicines – some of them are poisonous and expert knowledge is required for their use.

With some *N'anga*, I devised an exercise that was administered to 48 school children, aged between eleven and sixteen, who were divided into two groups: those who lived with a healer in the family, and those who did not. In the exercise, eleven plants had to be identified by name, their use had to be described, the part that had medicinal properties had to be pointed out, and a description of the preparation and administration of each had to be given. The children were then asked to collect medicinal plants from the surrounding bush and, in similar terms, describe their use.

**T**he range of the children's knowledge surprised me. Children with healers knew more than those living without healers in their families. The findings suggest that the knowledge of healing and ritual is widespread and that healers do not hold a monopoly on knowledge, that is to say, they are monitored by a knowing population. On conceptions of evil, I found, in essence, that children are well-versed in a kind of knowledge that can be termed religious and is seen as incorporating common sense, that is, known to a lot of children. The range of their ideas and the individuality of their expressions were clear – they were not simply repeating adult formulae but had pondered carefully about many topics usually considered to be of concern only to adults.

The point is that the documentation of their knowledge demanded close observation over two years of children as patients and acolytes; participation in activities like beer rituals and herb

collection with children and healers; interviews with N'anga, young people, and community members. It also called for knowledge of Zezuru belief systems. And the devising of an exercise to find out what children knew.

There are many ways to engage children as ethnographers of their own experience. They include (depending on the age of the children) the use of journals, notebooks, drawings, dreams, the identification and collection of plants, photographs, tape recorders, video machines and a wide array of exercises like mapping. In the kind of anthropological methods that I employ in working with children, I do not use large samples or controlled tests or experiments; nor do I replicate exercises downtime or statistically confirm any claim or notion.

My approach can be categorised in four ways. First, I aim at a total coverage of a segment of life, for example, healing; or a specific issue, for example, child labour; or a particular place, for example, children's experiences of war in an area of Zimbabwe. The idea is to achieve a saturation of understanding from every possible angle that includes checking the effects of time, place, mood and contingencies like famine. The second way involves an attempt 'not to know' before the study begins but, instead, to learn what questions to ask. The third way is to apply quantitative measures where applicable, often inventing suitable techniques created for the occasion, for example, in measuring a child's labour. The fourth is to learn as much as possible about the context in which the child lives including the history, myths, ritual, literature, expert knowledge, bureaucratic practices and beliefs of the people to whom the child is linked.

There are usually few children in my samples, but I work closely with them for periods that extend from 18 months to five years, as also with members of their families and their communities, their friends or comrades so that there are often 60 people's lives that are intricately examined. My hope is to find out what we do not know about the young: the ideas they hold that are opposed to received opinion, and their sets of behaviour that challenge common assumptions or refute deeply held beliefs. Sometimes anthropologists can offer particular sorts of knowledge to other disciplines. One example follows.

Currently, I am involved in a major analysis of the extraordinary increase in the engagement of children in war. Children in armed conflict are often characterised as victims, or are seen as sources of violence, or as pawns in political games. This is, no doubt true some of the time, but the categorizations tend to ignore children and youth's understanding of social forces and the nature of violence. It fails to take into account their reasons for engaging in conflict, the development of their political consciousness, their cognizance of ethical dilemmas, their ambivalence towards dominant norms, or even the patterns of their recovery. Perhaps if we understood more about that kind of knowledge, we could contribute to the analysis of the definition and description of conflicts, especially the sort that proliferates in Africa.

The definition of war drawn from the Geneva Conventions (and larger protocols) led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa into (in my opinion) miscasting the roles youth played in resistance against apartheid. The Geneva Convention separates those who are involved in war into categories of civilians and soldiers and this division was replicated by the

TRC as ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’.

**I**n consequence, most young people who fought against the apartheid regime inside the country were not regarded as soldiers and were treated as civilians. Many of them rejected the labels of victims or perpetrators and refused to testify before the Commission and, as a result, their very important role in the fight to secure democracy has not been adequately documented. After great conflict, the parts played by the young (and by adult women) are almost always left out of the archive partly because of the ways in which wars are defined – ways that no longer describe the nature of current conflicts.

Those who were young when they entered the struggle in South Africa were given no pensions by liberation organizations or the government partly because each had to prove that he or she had been a member of an underground organisation for five years or more. That was something very difficult to prove even for those who had been imprisoned frequently and for long periods because of their activities. No major programmes for skill training or employment guarantee schemes were developed especially for them. I discovered in working with young activists that local leaders were often deeply involved in resistance for ten to fifteen years and that the labour of revolution is hard work. We know little about the work of war under war’s modern guise or about the unremitting toil of everyday engagement with conflict for local leaders.

In studying the young who live under difficult circumstances we can come to understand more clearly the fragility of institutions, the flexibility of social-cultural frames, the complexity of the micro mechanics of political-economic existence, the close weave of the threads that tie global sites to micro sites in terms of decision making, the tenacity of some beliefs, and the rapidity of change. All of which demands our constant attention and the re-configuration of meanings if we aim to describe the situation of children accurately.

**I**t may be worth commenting on some of the difficulties that arise in devising and using a wide range of methods. Particular methods frequently fail because children grow impatient when their interest is not held – interviews are especially problematic for this reason – or one can waste time, money and effort in trying to employ older children to interview or observe others. There is the danger of the boredom factor as repetition is inherent in many methods of documentation. Care must be taken to avoid manipulating results through the very design of a method and to avoid imposing an agenda – when, for example, what is recorded is done to suit the frame of the study not what is actually out there.

One must be wary, too, of clipping children’s productions from their context and requiring of them more than can be supported by the scaffolding of other forms of knowing. I think, especially, of the manner in which children’s drawings are often taken out of context and made to support grand theories. Another obvious problem arises when one yields to the temptation to make a child representative of all or many children whereas he/she may only represent a group of children. Clearly, one should approach children in an ethnographic study just as one does an adult, that is, with the same obligation to meet the discipline’s basic professional and ethical requirements plus the added provisions that respect for which their age and stage calls. Two questions must always be kept in mind: how do we insure that we do not use children in

unfounded ways? And what would those be?

Veena Das and I have begun a new study called *Child on the Wing: Children Negotiating the Everyday in the Geography of Violence* in the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University with the generous support of an award from the Rockefeller Foundation's Humanities and the Study of Culture programme. It sets out to document children's lives, with a focus on the mobile trajectories of their experiences especially under conditions of political violence and economic uncertainty, and to find out how children navigate and are shaped by their environments.

**W**e hope to reconfigure research methods to mirror children as active makers of their worlds. In doing so, we will attempt to break from interpreting their lives within languages and scripts normally used for understanding adults. It has become a truism that children are agents in shaping their own worlds. Yet there has been too little close documentation of how they navigate the everyday, shoulder care and responsibility and devise strategies of survival. Our aim is not to assume that the zone through which they move is one of transparent experience.

Children reflect on social norms. Their reflections may underscore lines of stress and changing mores. Their reflections may even show how nuances of symbolic expression are transmitted across generations.

\* Herman Melville, 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.' In Adam Phillips, 2002, *Promises , Promises. Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Faber and Faber, 1853, pp. 282-295.