From participatory observation to participant action with children in street situations: Reflections from the field

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Abstract

Drawing insights from my doctoral fieldwork experience using naturalistic methods of inquiry with children in street situations, the paper argues for using theoretical frameworks and participatory research methods that enable a dynamic and flexible way to look at children in street situations as capable social actors with agency.

The paper uncovers how children in street situations evolved from being passive respondents to co-constructors of knowledge in the research process. I also elaborate on an array of data collection methods falling into the realm of naturalistic inquiry, including semi-walking interviews and projective play activities. Finally, the challenges encountered in the field and reflections are stated.

Keywords: Children in street situations, resilience, naturalistic methods of inquiry, participatory research, fieldwork journey

Introduction

This paper is a window into my doctoral fieldwork experience with children in street situations in Chennai city, India. It describes my journey as a researcher, the challenges encountered and the attempts made to transcend them to engage actively with children.

In the last decade, there has been a surge in the usage of methods that give power to children and acknowledge their contribution in knowledge production about themselves. Children are being considered as active agents and as valuable contributors in the research process (Aitken 2001; Christensenn 2004; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). Despite these efforts to move beyond positivist frameworks, voices of children in difficult circumstances remain largely absent in research studies particularly in the Indian context.

Against this backdrop, my research attempted to decipher resilience in the lives of children in street situations using a participative framework. Drawing examples from my own fieldwork in the urban slums of Chennai, an attempt has been made to describe the methodological journey that resulted in meaningful engagement with children in street situations.

Methodology as visualized

A commitment to capture children's perspectives by actively engaging them in the research process shaped the methodological choices of the study. As a first step, when the study was being conceptualized, different qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography and narrative enquiry were reviewed and compared with each other. The ethnographic methodology was found to be most suitable, as it would help in yielding rich layers of data relating to resilience among children in street situations. Ethnography, one of the oldest and most basic approaches in social sciences, originated in anthropology and sociology. Over the years, it has evolved into a multi-disciplinary movement in qualitative research (Atkinson, 2007). Participation and observation in natural environments are considered to be the cornerstones of ethnographic research. Ethnographic approaches have also been widely used in the study of children and their lived experiences (Christensen and James, 2000). Ethnographers engage with participants intimately and refrain from assessing them in any way (Weisner, 1996).

Another determining factor for choosing ethnography is the inclusive nature of the approach. Children have largely been viewed as mere objects in social sciences research (James & Prout, 2003). Ethnography has been identified to offer children the space to engage in the research process and communicate using multiple ways (James et al, 1998). Researchers have regarded ethnography as one of the most effective methods in the study of childhood, as it allows children to have a direct voice and participate in the construction of knowledge relating to them and their societies (James & Prout, 1997). Child-centered ethnographic research values children's experiences and facilitates interpretive understanding of children's lives (James, 2001). This led to visualizing that a traditional in-depth ethnographic approach would be most suitable for the study.

Participatory research with children in street situations

This section discusses how the methodology unfolded during fieldwork.

The first discovery on entering the field was that children in street situations did not belong to a single cohort. The fieldwork process was initiated with the help of two non-governmental organizations with children in street situations in North Chennai. Shelter homes managed by organizations working in the field of child protection in Chennai served as the first point of contact with children in street situations. The first few weeks in these centers focused on just being there and on observation. The shelters I visited offered access to free education, food and shelter to children in street situations.

In the subsequent weeks, ice-breaking exercises and trust-building activities were initiated. This helped in getting closer to the children after weeks of just 'hanging around.' Initially, the children appeared a little hesitant and uncertain about my presence. Their participation in the research activities also appeared to be forced. This challenge was addressed by having an open conversation with the children. They were asked to write down their opinions and feedback anonymously. The exercise did not yield the desired results. Struggling to figure out what the invisible barrier was, I continued with regular visits to the shelter for about a month. It was observed that most children living in the shelters were brought there by police/child welfare personnel against their wishes. More often than not, these beleaguered children take solace in such homes only as a last resort, when the abuse from parents or relatives becomes incessant or the actions by police or child protection workers make their stay on the streets untenable.

These shelters/children's institutions are supposed to provide a range of specialized services keeping the best interest of the child in mind and focusing a chunk of their efforts on the rehabilitation of these children. However, many of these institutions still operate within a paternalistic framework and view children on the streets as deviant delinquents. The children often live in a stifled environment with the institute staff enforcing stringent diktats.

Subsequently, I ventured to meet the children in schools or in the playground just outside the shelter. We engaged in informal conversations. We spoke about their daily routines, school, favorite movies and film stars or just spent time together doing/discussing nothing. Within a few weeks, the children began to get comfortable with my presence. They asked questions about my personal life and invited me to spend time with them in the shelters. They also wanted to learn English and Hindi and watched videos on my mobile. They opened up and revealed their concerns with regard to my relationship with the NGO staff. Their feelings were validated, and confidentiality was assured. Some children in shelter homes agreed to participate in the interview process, while some were willing to have discussions but not be included as co-researchers. We brainstormed the study process and methods. The children living in shelters suggested visiting communities to identify children living in street situations. Most children who live independently on the streets lead secretive and isolated lives.

 The barrier of identifying them was broken with the help of the children living in the shelters. They served as entry points to the lives of children living independently on the streets. They guided me into the community and reversed their roles in the research process. The children used their personal contacts such as friends, employers and family members and helped in contacting the children on the streets. They also provided insights on building rapport with the children on the streets and interacting with others in the community and helped in learning a few words in the local dialect. Their roles switched from respondents/participants to contributors.

Many children living on the streets constantly relocate from one place to another. Extended engagement and long-term observation appeared very challenging with this group of mobile children. The first meeting with most of the children happened in the presence of children from the shelters. They played a significant role in the ice-breaking process. Many children among those who lived independently on the streets consented to be a part of the study only after they sought assurance that no attempt would be made to investigate about their places of residence or to constantly pursue them after the interview. Children belonging to families without housing facilities were identified in the same community. The children belonging to these families found it difficult to speak in front of their parents/siblings/neighbors. This led to meetings with the children in spaces where they felt safe and comfortable. Meetings began to take place when parents were not around, in schools and in public spaces such as the railway station, parks, bus stops and places where the children worked. In such meetings, the children expressed that they wished to be interviewed in a few meetings and did not prefer extended engagement.

Considering the challenges discussed above, the theoretical beliefs and the uniqueness of the study population, the focused ethnographic approach was adapted. This method is a branch of ethnography that pays attention to a specific phenomenon. It is a proven method to conduct enquiries into lives that are socially and culturally highly fragmented and differentiated. This form of ethnography focuses on the intensity of fieldwork as opposed to duration.

Research tools that emerged

It was certain that a conventional interview would not be suitable. There was a need to provide room for the children to share and express freely while also being engaging to them. Embracing the new sociology of childhood, the study aimed to learn from the children themselves about their lives and experiences and did not want to reduce them to passive respondents. The study incorporated methods such as reflective games, drawings and role plays into the research process to co-construct multifaceted knowledge relating to resilience in children in street situations. These methods are known to address the issue of power dynamics and motivate children to contribute actively and act as agents in the research process (Aitken, 2001; Mayall, 2003; Skelton and Valentine, 1998). A plethora of methods were identified based on existing literature. However, the decision on which methods to use and how to tailor them to suit the needs of the study was made based on the children's insights. A deliberate attempt was made to decolonize the tool development process and create avenues to maximize the children's roles in decision making.

Interview guide

A loosely structured interview guide was developed based on the objectives of the study. The guide was revised based on suggestions from the children. The first section of the guide focused on understanding the background of the child. The second section focused on understanding the lived experiences and resilience. The questions were framed in an open-ended manner without many prompts, with the intent of facilitating children to open up and speak in their own words and manner.

Activities were interspersed into the interview process to foster expressions about sensitive topics such as experiences of trauma and abuse and to gain a compressive and nuanced understanding of the lives of children in street situations.

Photo prompts

This is a straightforward method that involves using photographs/images to invoke comments, memory and discussion (Banks, 2001). Young and Barret (2000) used photo diaries to understand the lives of children in street situations in Kampla. The decision to use photo prompts was made to generate layered understandings relating to abusive experiences of the children. These photos were drawn from a poster developed by Tulir, an organization working to prevent child abuse in Chennai. Each photo was accompanied by a one/two-word description in Tamil. These photographs were shown to the children using mobile phones and as actual pictures.

Construction of daily timelines *(En valkaizhil oru nal)*

The practice of using autobiographical timelines is a common practice with children. Most children on the streets had no structured activities or routines that they followed, except for those residing in the shelters, and they found it difficult to talk about their daily routines. The activity was named by one of the children in the shelters as *'En valkaizhil oru nal,'* which translates into 'A day in my life.' The child came up with the idea of asking the children to narrate a typical day in their lives. The usual practice of using pens/pencils and drawing on chart papers worked with some children. Some children suggested that it would be better to use chalks on a slate or sticks on the ground.

Walking interviews

Street environments are central to the lives of the children who participated in this study. Enabling a child to move through a familiar environment and narrating incidents makes them feel closer to the experience as opposed to sit-down research methods (Kusenbach, 2003). Walking interviews were used so that the children could lead me to places that they felt defined their lives and tell narratives that they felt shaped their lives. As we traversed the streets, these walking interviews provided space for discussions to unfold naturally without any prompts or triggers.

Role play

During one of the brainstorming sessions, the children demonstrated an activity with one child posing as the researcher and the others as participants. This incident led to the incorporation of role play into the interview process.

Many children shared that they longed for good friends whom they could trust and confide in. During role play, children imagined that I was their trustworthy friend/mentor and discussed the following topics with me.

1. One incident I have never told anyone else
2. One thing/incident I'm very proud of
3. My most painful moment so far
4. My happiest moment so far

Draw and write/speak

Drawings are known to act as nonverbal stepping stones into the world of childhood experiences and emotions (Jolley, 2009). Most children in the shelters enjoyed drawing and suggested using drawings. I often received sketches of film stars and greeting cards with cartoons from the children in shelters. They suggested that incorporating drawing would be a great way to engage in meaningful interactions with children. Drawings were used to understand the families of the children in street situations.

Engagement in participatory methods

Sixty children in street situations participated in the study. The fieldwork was spread over a duration of 18 months. Among the 60 children, 12 children were in contact with shelter homes, 20 children belonged to families living on the streets, 11 children lived independently on the streets, and 17 children moved between street and home.

Interviews lasted between one and four hours and were spread maximum over three meetings. Each interview followed its own course and gave space for children to take lead. Confidentiality was assured in the very beginning of the interview process. One copy of the assent form was handed over to the child. Permission was sought for note taking, and the reason for taking down notes was explained. Only four interviews with children in shelter homes were audio recorded. I discontinued using audio recorders after noticing that it made children conscious and interfered with the interview process. Audio recording was also not effective during walking interviews.

Most interviews began with neutral discussions and ended with a fun activity. I made every attempt to mitigate the formal structure of a conventional interview. The way the interview was conducted depended on the child's age, setting, rapport with the interviewer and willingness to participate and articulate. I told the children that I did not have the answers to my questions and needed their help to understand things.

Due to such an approach, I was able to obtain diverse responses and co-produce multifaceted knowledge with the children in street situations.

Engagement with children in contact with shelters

As discussed, I initiated the fieldwork journey in shelter homes hoping that the residential nature of the shelter homes would provide opportunities for sustained observation and interactions with children in street situations. After weeks of informal interaction with the children in shelters, a few children in the shelter homes agreed to participate in the study. Meetings took place with them in their schools, in parks, in roads while they walked to schools, in bus stops and in the shelters.

Most activities were well received by the children living in the shelters. Role play, drawing and photo prompts were facilitated in the shelters when the staff were not around and in a park located in the shelter. The activity of playing snakes and ladders took place in the playground situated outside the shelter.

Through drawings, we discussed family relationships. The process of drawing enabled the children to express about their homes, parents, siblings and their experiences of abuse, trauma and poverty.

All the activities we engaged in were created with the help of the children in shelters. This led to their increased participation and involvement.

Participatory engagement with children in the community

The second phase was engagement with the children living independently on the streets. The experience, as anticipated, was highly challenging. It took numerous visits to merely identify the children living independently on the streets. The process was physically strenuous and time consuming. Many children were initially apprehensive and unwilling to even engage in informal conversations.

"I struggled to reach the children who lived independently on the streets. After my repeated attempts to talk and get closer to them, I felt a little rejected. Later on when I reflected on the difficulties I encountered, I was able to grasp the complexity of their lives. Firstly, I was able to understand that my difficulties in gaining access to them reflected the secrecy of their invisible lives. I was able to understand that the fear of rescue and being uprooted from the streets pervaded their lives. I learned a lot about the lives of children living independently in street situations even before engaging with them through the efforts taken to reach them."

-Research diary

After several independent visits, the children from the shelters began accompanying me as peer researchers. They used their personal contacts such as friends, employers, shelter staff and adults they knew in the community and helped in gaining access to the children living independently on the streets. The barrier of an outsider/stranger was broken when the children from the shelters took the lead and guided me into the community. Many children who lived independently on the streets said they constantly relocated with the fear of being rescued, abused or kidnapped. They also had unstable jobs and kept moving from place to place to make ends meet. Some children who were in contact with their families balanced their time between their home and the streets. The nature of their lives and the risks they were exposed to made it practically impossible to engage with them for an extended time period. The same was the case with the children living with their families on the streets. They also constantly relocated based on the availability of employment opportunities for their parents and to escape disasters. Many families said that they resided in different locations during summer and monsoon. A maximum of three interviews were conducted with the children in a location they decided, where they felt safe and comfortable. Many children refused to be interviewed in their communities. Hence, interviews were conducted in open shelters, railway stations, bus stops, schools and on the streets.

Activities were interspersed between the interviews based on the interest and willingness of the child. Drawing/writing activities were rejected by many children living independently in street situations. They eagerly participated in walking interviews and role plays. Many children took the lead during interviews. For example, during one of the interviews, which took place in a bus stop, a child guided me to a tunnel behind a bridge and said, "*Look, this is where I stay. This is my living room, kitchen and sleeping area.*" In such cases, there was no need for me to initiate a walking interview. In a few interviews, some children were uncomfortable to express themselves verbally. In these situations, I initiated activities.

Challenges

Transcending barriers and gaining entry

Prior to the actual commencement of data collection, I was introduced to the children in the institutions as a researcher interested in their lives, especially their interactions with the street. As discussed, this acted as an invisible barrier between the children and me, one which was broken after several weeks of rapport-building efforts. The children were wary of me at the beginning. They looked at me more as an outsider and held back sensitive information, those which they felt might curtail their regular sojourns on the streets for personal and economic reasons.

Meeting the children on their turf, the streets, outside the protective cocoon of an institutionalized set up, made me feel extremely vulnerable initially. It required a great many thawing visits to the community to become familiar with the street culture and mobile lives of the children in street situations and to overcome my apprehensions.

The problem of getting children to genuinely participate in my study was compounded by the fact that many of them saw my being in the community and streets as a means to earn some extra money. Some children either refused outright to participate in the absence of any remuneration for their exertions or gave seemingly 'appropriate' responses in the hopes of getting something in return. I overcame this difficulty by offering goodies and food instead of money or by spending extra time.

Owing to an underlying intricate network of peers, a denial by any one child of the community to participate had a cascading effect wherein more denials were seen. I addressed this problem by repeatedly visiting the community and by gradually winning the trust of the children with the involvement of other children in street situations as co-researchers.

Dealing with harsh realities

As a psychiatric social worker, I had gained some experience of working with children with behavioral and conduct related issues, harmful patterns of substance use and with survivors of abuse. However, nothing prepared me for the shocking scenes of children moving around with sickles and compasses to protect themselves and hearing teenage girls recount their paralyzing trauma of unwanted childbearing. These

haunting experiences got the better of most children, and they broke down when they talked about them. It would be impossible to fully capture the extent and intensity of those experiences in all their traumatic nuances. These haunting experiences of the children tugged at my heartstrings, and I was at times overwhelmed by the harsh realities of street life that these children had to endure. In retrospect, these narratives raise a lot of questions relating to child protection in the context of children in street situations.

Yet, I felt grateful to the children for their trust and for allowing me into their world, which outsiders seldom had access to. I was able to understand the children on the streets who have largely been misrepresented and misunderstood. For all the strife that these children had endured, it was extremely brave of them to have trusted me and to have let me into their lives, at times going against their survival instincts. I consider their trust in me a big honor and a reflection of their hope and resilience.

Breaking rigid and determined approaches

The children in street situations operated a potent, intricate network, and this meant that my whereabouts as an outsider amidst their community was always known to them. I realized that certain replies to my questions had a distinct flavor of having gone through the collective sieve of this network to sound appropriate and to withhold sensitive information. The researcher in me had to break free from the shackles of sticking to a prepared questionnaire and make constant modifications based on the situation without altering the fabric of the methodology too much.

Reflections and learnings

My field experience has shown me that there is no one way of carrying out research. More often than not, different methodologies fuse or at least overlap during the execution phase. My foray into the community was multimodal and involved extensive informal interactions and activities, not excluding having food with the children or going to their workplaces. Field, in most cases, is the antithesis of what theory teaches us, and for this reason, I was forced many a time to think on my feet, after having exhausted all methods and techniques learned in classrooms, to motivate and persuade children to participate in this research.

The assumption that fieldwork would be a non-complicated extension of what I had learned from books and my mentors and the expectation of hitting the ground running and finishing the data collection without any inordinate delays were immediately doused when even a seemingly simple task of identifying a child living independently on the street seemed to feel like an insurmountable one. I was forced within a few hours of venturing into the community to fall back on the safety net of my mother tongue and my limited knowledge of the topography of the city to ward off unwanted conversations and not completely innocent innuendos. Times like these showed me the importance of making an attempt to do fieldwork in an area where not all dimensions were alien to the researcher. In my case, I believe my decision to carry out fieldwork in Chennai paid good dividends where any uninitiated researcher of a different tongue would have faced difficulty. The children made me realize the futility of carrying fancy board games, colors and stickers, things that were

seldom used by them, for group activities and suggested improvizing with materials available in the community, as crude as stones and sticks. The importance of making a connection with the children dawned upon me, where till now I had been looking at them through the prism of my exposure as a child.

Nothing ensures more success in a qualitative research, where everything hinges on the participation of the researched than the active involvement of the facilitators. While organized formal methods work in an institutional set up, where the individual or a group is collected in the researchers' area of influence, my time in the field made me realize the importance of informal interactions. With the children in street situations, my interactions and thawing sessions with them enabled me to look past their visage and constructively obtain insights into their resilience.

Based on my fieldwork experience, I recommend that researchers consider participative approaches with children in street situations and similar populations. I argue that these methods not only appeal to children but will also strengthen the research processes by increasing the agency of the participants.

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