

## “Which One Is Yours?": Children and Ethnography

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**Abstract** This paper explores roles that children play in ethnographic research. Based on the limited literature on children in the field, and drawing on examples from ethnographies across disciplines, I identify four roles for children: 1) as “wedges,” or as instrumentally important in helping adult ethnographers gain access in various ways; 2) as collaborators; 3) as objects of study; and 4) as subjects of study. I also discuss the ways in which these roles illuminate key methodological issues in ethnography, like reflexivity, ethics, and agency. The paper synthesizes and integrates previously disconnected research on the presence of children in the field with ethnographies in which children and childhood are the topics of research. I draw on my own fieldwork experiences for further illustration.

**Keywords** Childhood and adolescence · Fieldwork methods · Ethnographic process

“Which one is yours?” the woman asked, gesturing to the children on the playground. Taken aback, I laughed and quickly replied, “Oh, none of them! I’m here doing dissertation research.”

“I thought you looked a little young,” she smiled in return. “So, what is your dissertation about?”

When this exchange occurred early in my fieldwork—studying families with elementary school-age children who play chess, soccer, or dance competitively—I was surprised. As a young woman in her mid-twenties it was biologically possible for me to have children who were old enough to be attending a summer enrichment camp, but it would have been socially unexpected given my educational background. I wrote up this exchange in my fieldnotes as it made an impression on me in terms of the ways I was perceived by others in the field.

A few weeks later I was asked the same question and I responded the same way. Once again, the response gave me entrée to talk about my research. The woman who had questioned me, needlessly embarrassed for what she perceived as a social gaffe, was

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interested in my topic and said she would be willing to sit down over coffee and share her family's experiences. At this point I began thinking about the ways in which having or not having my own children may have helped or hurt me in the ethnographic process.

By the third time I was asked this question, this time on a soccer field, I knew it was a question worth considering more thoroughly. What does it mean that when a young, white woman is around children the automatic assumption is that she is a mother; and how different would the reaction have been had I not been white or been a male?<sup>1</sup> Based on the seemingly innocuous question, "which one is yours?" I began thinking about the ways in which fieldwork with and around children presents particular challenges for an ethnographer.

To think more systematically about children and ethnography, I began to review a range of ethnographic works from different disciplines. At first I targeted pieces written explicitly about fieldwork and families; from there, I read works that were discussed and cited in those pieces. Yet, many examples of children and ethnography came up in unexpected places—as in Bourgois' *In Search of Respect*, which, while reading for another project, I found contained a particularly powerful example of taking one's own child into the field, discussed below. Based on these varied and various readings<sup>2</sup> I identified four roles that children can play in ethnographies: 1) as "wedges," or as instrumentally important in terms of helping adults gain access to fieldsites, relationships, and knowledge; 2) as collaborators, when children contribute to the formulation of research questions, collect data, or write reports; 3) as objects of study, when the topic of an ethnography is about children's issues but children themselves are not directly observed and/or consulted; and 4) as subjects of study, when children are seen as individuals fully able to answer questions in a worthwhile way.

The analytic description of these roles is not normative. I make no claims that it is "good" or "bad" for children to be ethnographic collaborators. Instead I examine what is gained from children's participation and issues that warrant caution for each role. In particular, I explore what is special about fieldwork with children, both within and across these four roles, with an emphasis on reflexivity, agency, and ethics. At the same time and in a similar vein, I consider what all ethnographers can learn about fieldwork by thinking more deeply and systematically about research with and about children.

### Children and the ethnographic process

In recent years, qualitative research on childhood<sup>3</sup> and family life has become more prominent within the social sciences, and especially sociology (for example, Lareau 2003).

<sup>1</sup> Robert Petrone's (2007) experiences as a white male studying adolescent boys who skateboard in a Midwestern city provide a clue: when parents found out he did not "have one" of the boys at the skateboard park and that he was "hanging out" around them, they often asked him point blank, "Are you a pedophile?"

<sup>2</sup> Of course, while I believe I have covered nearly all of the most important works in this area, it is necessarily incomplete in terms of scope (for example, while I have mentioned and covered fieldwork with children in the fields of medical research and education, these areas are not covered as extensively as those in sociology or anthropology) and time-relevancy, as new works are produced. That said, the works cited for this paper, and many of the works cited by these references, comprise a broad and comprehensive landscape of this "field."

<sup>3</sup> While there is much theoretical debate about how to define "childhood," in this paper I use the term to refer to those under 18 still living with their family; here the term incorporates what others have defined elsewhere as children, pre-adolescents, adolescents, and teenagers.

Yet few scholars have written about conducting ethnographic research with children.<sup>4</sup> The most notable exception is *Knowing Children*, by Fine and Sandstrom, published in 1988. More recently, William Corsaro (Corsaro and Molinari 2000) has written about conducting fieldwork with children in a collected volume on various types of research with children, including in the for-profit research sector and psychology (Christenson and James 2000), and Annette Lareau has considered the ways in which family relations shape the qualitative research process (Lareau 2000).

Anthropologists offer more specific insight into understanding children and ethnography by way of four edited collections—Cassell (1987); Butler and Turner (1987); Flinn et al. (1998), and a special issue of *Anthropology and Humanism* (1998). The authors in these volumes focus on the experiences of ethnographers taking their own children into the field and the ways in which the children affected the research. However, the majority of these pieces focus more on practical advice for taking children into the field rather than on overarching analyses.

To date, there have not been any attempts to connect the sociological and anthropological literatures, a void I seek to fill in this paper by proposing analytic categories that transcend strict classification to one of the two literatures. Thus, I turn my attention to the various ways that scholars in both disciplines incorporate children in ethnography—as wedges, collaborators, subjects, and objects—and I analyze how different child relationships may affect both the process of ethnography and the final ethnographic work. It is worth noting that these roles are meant to apply to working with children and working with one's own children, but the first two tend to apply more to the latter and vice versa.

To advance the analytic enterprise I identify three ways in which children, whether one's own or not, can affect the ethnographic process across the four roles. The first is through their mere presence in the field. Simply by “being there” children can help establish a fieldworkers' identity, mainly by helping the adult occupy an understandable role in a community. Next, children can promote stronger researcher/informant relations and access to information. For example, children can help dampen tensions between the fieldworker and the subjects of research. The presence of a child may help rule out other relationship possibilities, including those of an intimate nature. Children can also level relationships that would otherwise be hierarchical, reducing class and status differences by creating a common denominator as “parents” that span other social boundaries. Finally, children can help open and close windows into communities and research topics, perhaps by bringing up issues the fieldworker had not thought of before. Finally, children can affect ethnographies by making substantive contributions in the form of knowledge and insight, helping with the research process by gathering data, or even conducting analyses that appear in published ethnographic works.

In a larger sense, this focus on the roles and mechanisms related to children and ethnography is a way of thinking about the ways various personal relationships, such as siblings, spouses, or close friends, can impact the ethnographic process. Thinking about children and fieldwork also raises ethnographic issues like reflexivity and agency, particularly since childhood represents a unique time in the life course which puts children in particularly powerless positions in relation

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that other fields, like geography (i.e., Hart 1997), along with medical anthropologists and researchers (i.e., Irwin and Johnson 2005), particularly those outside of the US, have been involving children in the research process in meaningful ways and thinking about the meaning of their participation for some time.

to adults.<sup>5</sup> Such topics are similarly confronted by all types of ethnographers, so the issues I discuss in this paper are applicable for all those who carry personal relationships, and not just children, into a fieldsite. The presence of personal relations in the field, let alone those of an intimate or sexual nature, generally remain shrouded in silence (the name of a volume on sex and identity in the field, *Taboo*, is apropos [Kulick and Willson 1995]), but as ethnography as a method increasingly embraces reflexivity issues like these call out for attention.<sup>6</sup> Before turning to these issues I discuss each of the four ethnographic roles for children in turn.

### Children's roles in ethnography

Children appear in ethnographies in various ways. Sometimes they appear in an account because their parents are the fieldworkers working on an ethnography. Other times their lives or activities are the subject of an ethnographic study by a non-relative. The following discussion focuses on four different roles for children—wedges, collaborators, subjects, and objects. Of course, “on the ground,” these distinctions are not so clear-cut; in most cases there is likely overlap in the four roles, but I have separated them in the below discussion for analytical clarity.

Scholars of childhood and adolescence have written about the absence of children as the objects, and even the subjects, of all research, whether it is ethnographic or quantitative. The advent of “childhood studies” has changed the situation somewhat (Christenson and James 2000). But we see much less discussion by researchers on children as wedges and collaborators there, as the attention is more on children's lives. My initial focus on children in these two roles is partly tied to studies that have called attention to our neglect of childhood as a topic of research.

#### Children as “wedges”

As a boy of five, Jonathan Wylie moved to rural France with his father, a French scholar researching modern French country life. He returned again in 1957 for a year, this time as an eleven-year-old. In an essay written about 30 years later, Wylie dubbed himself and his younger brother “‘Daddy's little wedges,’ realizing that we were earnest of his good intentions, and gave him a natural entrée into village life” (1987, p. 110). Neither Wylie nor his brother acted as informants for their father's research, but they did facilitate his efforts to build relationships, especially through their involvement in local schools.

Wylie's term “wedge” is appropriate, as parent-researchers<sup>7</sup> may use their children to gain a foothold in a community, insert themselves into a social network, or ease the

<sup>5</sup> Of course we can still learn a lot about our craft as ethnographers by thinking deeply about doing fieldwork with powerful populations as well, as Bernard Barber did in his 1973 paper on access to powerful professions.

<sup>6</sup> An exception to the shroud of silence about previous relationships can be found in Megan Comfort's work. For example, in “‘Papa's House’” Comfort explains that in 1995, five years before her doctoral fieldwork, she had met many women at San Quentin while working for a non-profit HIV-prevention program. Comfort said, “My familiarity with long-term visitors and their willingness to introduce me to other women coming to the prison were decisive in my obtaining access to ‘The Tube’ (2002, 473).”

<sup>7</sup> It is important to point out that children may be able to act as wedges for adults who are not their parents. It could be an aunt, uncle, brother, sister, or child of a close friend who is an ethnographer and who uses a child as a fieldwork wedge. In those cases, it is unlikely that a child would accompany the non-parent into the fieldsite if it is far from home, but it is possible that a child could help facilitate entry or access to information. Overall such a situation seems to be rare, as I was not able to locate a published ethnography that explicitly describes such a situation.

formation of a new relationship. This may unfold in unintentional ways;<sup>8</sup> others are quite deliberate, depending on research objectives. This wedging can occur in three ways, often with overlap.

### *Wedging into fieldsites*

The first concerns the earliest stage of fieldwork—finding a fieldsite. In an essay on children and parents in the field, the wife of anthropologist John Fernandez, Renate Fernandez, argues that this is one of the five major ways in which children impact parents' research engagements. She wrote that children “nudge us toward certain communities and individuals, and rule out others” (1987, p. 186). To illustrate her point she recounted the story of her two-year-old son, Luke, and how she and her husband used him as a “probe.” They purposely sent him ahead of the family when they went out to survey Spanish villages in order to find one where they would settle the family and conduct research on land revitalization efforts. If the villagers ignored Luke, the Fernandez' concluded those same villagers would be unwilling to assist outsiders, thus making it difficult to carry out fieldwork there. When they reached the village of Escobines, they knew they had found the right fieldsite when “an elderly villager suddenly scooped up Luke a small distance away from us” (1987, p. 190).

Other fieldworkers use their children to find sites closer to home. Sociologist Sherri Grasmuck became interested in youth baseball because of her son's participation—an illustration of the ways in which children's mere presence in a field helps simply by placing an ethnographer in a particular community. She explained that to divert her attention away from worrying about her son striking out “as a coping mechanism, I began over time to observe other parents” (2005, p. 1). Her actual fieldsite, an organization she calls the Fairmount Sports Association, was one that her son, daughter, and husband all were involved with; her husband even went on to be “the commissioner.” Her observations over the years and established relationships with volunteers and parents eased her transition from baseball mom and wife to researcher of youth baseball. Michael Messner also capitalized on his children's participation in youth sports. On the first day of his five-year-old son's soccer season he observed an incident between his son's team and a girl's team of the same age in which the boys team, called the Sea Monsters, started yelling at the all-girls team, the Barbie Girls, “NO BARBIE! NO BARBIE!” Using this incident as his primary evidence, Messner went on to write an article (in 2000) about how children construct gender.

### *Wedging relationships*

Once established in a fieldwork location, “little wedges” continue to help parents with fieldwork, particularly by helping them gain access to people, an example of the ways in which children can open or close particular windows to ethnographers. Consider Mimi and Mark Nichter who faced great difficulty conducting research on lay people's ideas about health care in rural Southern India. Mainly because of their status as a married couple without children, respondents thought the researchers did not have the experience to understand their responses and they wondered why they did not have children. However,

<sup>8</sup> An exception comes from researcher couple David R. Counts and Dorothy Ayers Counts who explained in a chapter on fictive families in the field: “When we thought about being a family in the field, or when we weighed its advantages and disadvantages, we did so instrumentally. Primarily, we thought our children's presence in the village made it easier to establish rapport with the Kaliai because...the common experience of raising children created a link of humanity between us” (1998, p. 151).

after their son, Simeon, was born, their fieldwork became much easier as people did their best to explain their health beliefs to the new parents, believing the information could be relevant to the Nichters' parenting. This highlights that in some fieldsites, being married but not having children is non-normative, so the presence of a child is normalizing. Additionally, the simple presence of the baby often made interview subjects open up more. Mimi Nichter explained:

Having a child gave people a familiar subject to talk to us about...This enhanced rapport and, to some degree, increased trust...We took Simeon on a great many of our interviews because strangers seemed to trust us more with a child (1987, p. 76–7).

Political scientist Michael Hanchard, a white American male, reported a similar experience while conducting fieldwork on black activists in Brazil. As a white, American man, Hanchard said that he experienced “frostiness” on the part of Brazilian women activists he tried to interview. When he returned to Brazil a year later—this time with his wife and child—he brought them along to his interviews. He explained that he “rescheduled appointments with women activists who had either stood me up, acted distant, or been downright hostile...In the presence of my wife and child, the interviewees were much more friendly, informative, and open” (2000, p. 179). Essentially Hanchard's son, likely along with his wife, helped to dampen tensions, caused by gender, race, and nationality, between him as a researcher and those he was studying.

Phillipe Bourgois also used his child to build relationships and trust across racial boundaries, though in his own country. When he was trying to meet men who worked a busy crack-selling corner, for his book *In Search of Respect*, he took his toddler son with him because as a white man he had to “allay the suspicions of the sellers that I might be an undercover cop” (2003, p. 263).<sup>9</sup> In this example it is clear that the presence of a child has a spillover effect which can defuse tension with others, in this case indicating trust and defining his role as *not* a representative of the law.<sup>10</sup>

These examples illustrate children's ability to break down barriers and to act as humanizers. Children can tell people more about the researcher as a person and as a social actor, even if just by their mere physical presence. They provide others information by which to place the researcher in the only social structure that is immediately relevant. Most of the time this occurs researchers use their own children, at least in most published accounts.

As I do not have children of my own, the children I met during fieldwork on competitive children's activities helped “wedge” relationships for me in two ways. The first way they helped me wedge relationships was with teachers, who often acted as gatekeepers, controlling access to families and various sites. For example, after spending two days as an observer at a chess camp in New York City, I found myself pitching in to tie shoelaces, comforting a crying child who lost a chess game, or putting on a Band-Aid. At the end of the week the owner of the camp informed me that it was clear that “the children like you and children can really see [the inside of] people.” Because the children trusted me, the teachers trusted me as well and introduced me to different families over the next few months. Additionally, some children told their own parents about me, which prompted the

<sup>9</sup> Notably, these examples are similar to Elijah's Anderson discussion of the role of dogs in his urban ethnography of Philadelphia, of which he wrote, “Whether they are kept as protectors or strictly as pets, their presence influences encounters between strangers” (1990, p. 222).

<sup>10</sup> It is also important to think about a child's safety when taking them into the field, but this is obviously an individual decision. While Bourgois was comfortable with his son “learning to use his walker over broken sidewalks littered with crack vials” (2003, p. xv) that is surely not the case for all fieldworkers.

parents to ask to meet me. One exchange particularly stands out because a mother came to camp at the end of the day asking to meet “the new girl teacher.”<sup>11</sup> Because almost all of the adults involved with scholastic chess are male, her son went home all excited to have a “girl teacher,” so the mom wanted to meet me the next day. When I explained that I was actually there doing research she quickly handed me a business card (not her own, but some she had had made for her six year-old son) and said she was happy to help me, especially because her son liked me so much. In this case, my relationship with the little boy helped to wedge both a relationship and, ultimately, knowledge in the field.

### *Wedging knowledge*

Often because of the relationships built through the presence of a child in the field, researchers gain access to information that they might not have otherwise learned. For example, in the appendix to his classic community study *Blue Collar Community*, William Kornblum explained that it was only after his child was born that he was able to learn about certain conflicts between ethnic groups. He wrote,

We began spending a great deal of time with our Mexican neighbors because they were more likely to have young children than our somewhat older South Slavic and Italian neighbors. From them...I learned that there was continual conflict with the Mexicans from the Millgate and Bessemer Park neighborhoods on the other side of the community (1975, p. 233).

The new relationships that developed because of his child’s arrival helped Kornblum acquire fresh information about the community he was living in and studying. Maria Kefalas, one of the co-authors of *Promises I Can Keep*, about why poor women become single mothers, had a similar experience; Edin and Kefalas wrote of Kefalas’ experience, “During her second year in the field, Kefalas became pregnant with her first child, and this new common ground provided just the entrée she needed. Residents’ reactions to her pregnancy were almost as informative as the interviews themselves” (2005, p. 23). In this case having children was an egalitarian experience, giving Kefalas a new way to relate to the women with whom she was working.

Similarly, when anthropologist Alma Gottlieb returned with her six-year-old son to the West African village she had studied for years, she learned “much about Beng society that had previously been invisible to me” (1998, p. 122). Before she had a child, it had been easy for Gottlieb to gloss over generational relationships, but because of her son’s experiences, wedging into her own daily life, she began noticing them regularly. She goes so far as to call her son, Nathaniel, “a sort of inadvertent field assistant simply by his presence, pointing me to subtle timbres in relationships” (1998, p. 124).

Another striking example of a child’s presence in the field leading to new insights for the researcher-parent is from Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin*. In this seminal urban ethnography, Stack maps the complex relationships of many of the residents of a poor, black, urban city. A white woman might have had trouble gaining the trust of the residents, but Stack was able to so accurately detail and portray the systems of swapping, child-exchange, and fictive kin relationships due to her status as a single mother. Stack entered the field with a year-old son, Kevin. Through her willingness to both house other children and allow her

<sup>11</sup> I never taught chess at all, but the children often referred to me as a “teacher,” not knowing how else to refer to me. This is similar to Epstein’s experiences with children, when children frequently referred to her as teacher as they did not have another frame of reference (1998).

son to be housed by others she was able to conduct her fieldwork so effectively. Kevin helped her to level the relationships between her and the other mothers, transcending class and racial boundaries. She wrote, “People began accepting my trust and respect when I trusted my son with them” (1997, p. 29). Her participation in systems of exchange, through her son, helped her really understand how these practices operated in people’s daily lives.

Would Stack, Gottlieb, Kefalas, and Kornblum have learned about these relationships and practices without the presence of their children? Possibly; though it likely would have taken longer. As Gans points out in *The Levittowners*, children help families acclimate to new communities (1982, p. 45), mainly because kids are often the social glue that hold people together and draw them into networks; without them, many people are disconnected.

But, some ethnographers who have taken their children into the field with them do not feel that their children functioned as helpful wedges, instead making the whole experience take longer. For example, when nurse and anthropologist Melanie Dreher reflected on bringing her three children with her to Jamaica to research marijuana use she was surprised to find that,

While they did, indeed, provide both useful information and access to other children, I am not sure they contributed anything that I could not have gleaned myself, and probably more expeditiously. In fact, I suspect it took me twice the time to accomplish half the work that I would normally accomplish (1987, p. 164–5).

Certainly, as others report, time spent worrying about childcare, health issues, and homesickness may detract from the fieldwork experience—or at the least produce a different type of experience. Joan Cassell explained that because of the presence of her children, she did not take part in the nightlife where she lived and she took time at the beginning of her fieldwork to find suitable housing and childcare arrangements (1987). It is not hard to imagine that children frequently take their parents out of fieldwork contexts, closing as many windows as they can open. However, these negative side effects of children as wedges are rarely discussed and it is not surprising that ethnographers would preserve a social silence around failed relationships and negative social situations that occurred in the field in the published accounts of their work. This social silence also sometimes creeps in when it comes to the use of children as collaborators in ethnographies.

### Children as collaborators

Some researchers not only take their children into the field with them, but also incorporate them into the research design and process. Many of the anthropologists who wrote about their experiences with their children in Cassell’s 1987 volume described “fieldnotes” taken by their children and their written works reproduced excerpts of the children’s fieldnotes. A few parents, such as Christine Hugh-Jones, had her children keep diaries and fieldnotes as way to continue the children’s education, what the Indians she and her husband were studying referred to as their “paper dance” (1987, p. 51). Others, such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, actually had her children keep fieldnotes as part of the research process, with the intention of using their observations as data, since the children had different kinds of access to relationships and knowledge (1987, p. 221).

Sociologists Patricia and Peter Adler took this one step further by combining their professional and personal roles while researching and writing about adolescents’ peer cultures. They name this role “parent-as-researcher (PAR).” The Adlers observed and followed their son and daughter and the people around them for several years, including friends and enemies. The Adlers write that their “children inadvertently obliged us by occupying or passing through vastly different types of social groups and experiences” (2001, p. 22). They

go on to admit that they sometimes tolerated kids their children brought home who they did not like as parents but who they “found empirically interesting” (2001, p. 33).

The Adlers actually used their children as informants and it even seems they frequently asked them to clarify stories or to judge the suitability of an idea. For example, on one occasion Patricia was having a hard time getting information out of her daughter about a school dance. It was not until she said, ““Okay, I’m not asking as your mother anymore. I want to know as a sociologist”” (2001, p. 30–1), that her daughter gave her a detailed explanation about status and rivalries. Such role bifurcation is not usually so clear, but for this family conducting ethnographic research seemed to be a collaborative project.

Of course, some ethnographers collaborate with children who are not their own, relying on their help in formulating research questions and questions to ask participants, conducting interviews or gathering observational data, or, at the final stages, analyzing data, writing for published accounts, or presenting the findings to broader audiences (Best 2007, p. 14). However, as the examples show, it is important to note that when children are involved as collaborators it is usually with a project originally conceived and conducted by an adult.

One example of an ethnographic study that incorporated children at the early stages of methodological design is Ruth Emond’s study of Scottish group homes for children (2005). In discussing the ways in which the children influenced the final ethnography, Emond wrote that in post-pilot interview discussions the kids invited her to live with them, a possibility she had not considered before. This change in method greatly enhanced the study because Emond got access to information and relationships that she could not have had if she had only done interviews and focus groups with the children. Helen Roberts told a similar story in “Listening to Children.” She described a study she led on the integration of disabled students into “mainstream” classrooms in which three disabled boys participated. The boys’ experiences helped develop interview questions and aided the young men in conducting “first rate interviews” (2000, p. 232) for the project. Given their important contributions from the earliest stages of the project, they were listed as co-authors of the final report, *Everybody In?* (1997).

Elizabeth Chin’s research about African-American children’s thoughts on consumption (2001) was based on participant observation over two years in a public school in New Haven, Connecticut. For one school year she conducted fieldwork in a fifth grade classroom made up of twenty-two children. Her entrée was facilitated the year before when she offered a class in the school’s afterschool program. The class taught children how to develop and conduct an oral history project about their neighborhood. Twelve students learned how to conduct interviews, write questions, transcribe an interview, analyze data, and then write a report. The results of their project are reported as Appendix B of *Purchasing Power*, attributed to six children “with Elizabeth Chin;” the published report is described as “a collaborative research effort between a group of children and an anthropologist” (2001, p. 213). There was an added advantage to using children as collaborators in this case; because Chin was seen as more of a friend and partner—surely due in part to the fact that she viewed the children as her collaborators—the children did not see her in the authoritative role of teacher, and hence were more open with her about their lives during other fieldwork stages.

Using child collaborators not only helps improve the quality of data, it also can affect the reception the work receives. An article on children as researchers by British researcher Priscilla Alderson (2000) reveals that the use of children to disseminate findings usually gets more attention by the media because using child collaborators at presentations and conferences can help make the results more memorable. An example of this was written about in a collected volume on “girl studies” by Lobenstine et al. (2004) in which the

authors, including teenage girls as co-authors, described “taking a London conference by storm” with their presentation on relationships between mothers and daughters. The authors reported that they “brought down the house” (2004, p. 264) and were invited to present their findings at the plenary session so everyone in attendance could see the girls speak.

These examples notwithstanding, few researchers use children as collaborators, particularly in data collection phases (Morrow and Richards 1996, p. 92), and the few who do rely most often on adolescents rather than children under twelve. Consulting children, even in a study about children, reduces chances of funding by agencies (Boocock and Scott 2005, p. x). Funding agencies usually wonder if children tell the truth and assume parents and teachers offer more accurate information.<sup>12</sup> Boocock’s 1981 article on the life space of children, which relied on around 300 interviews with children—150 of which were conducted by children aged ten to twelve (one of the earliest studies to use children as researchers and collaborators in this way)—initially had difficulty securing funding until the Russell Sage Foundation sponsored the project.

Some children may resist collaborative efforts by purposely, or inadvertently, taking the research in a different direction from the ethnographer’s initial interests, which can be either distracting or useful. Parents of child collaborators may encounter different issues. For example, Karen Sinclair studied an extended family of New Zealand Maori for over 20 years. In that time she married and had a daughter, Emily, who often accompanied Karen into the field (1998). Emily used to help her mother by writing down the kinship relations of her playmates, but over time Emily “stopped in disgust...She had become an informant, with all the nasty connotations of surveillance and control through information. She treated me with a new contempt, a contempt directed at both my occupation and my methods” (p. 121).

Similarly, Sabine Kuegler and her two siblings helped, but eventually resisted, their linguist-missionary parents’ efforts to create a dictionary amongst the Fayu in Indonesia. Kuegler described the lifelong problems she has endured, such as loss of family and friends and a divorce, in *Child of the Jungle: The True Story of a Girl Caught Between Two Worlds* (2007). As the title implies she attributes her experiences as a child, trying to balance two very different roles and deal with parents as researchers, to her adult issues. Kuegler wrote, “I spent years struggling to conform to a culture and way of life that was foreign to me. And yet, although it may appear on the surface that I have managed well, I cannot seem to find the sense of belonging or peace of mind for which I yearn (p. ix).” Despite positives that can come out of collaborative relationships with children in ethnographies, there are also potential negative consequences, especially for the children.

### Children as objects and subjects of ethnographic study

Traditionally, and still today, many of the ethnographies that focus on children do so from a top-down perspective. As mentioned before, more recently social scientists have acknowledged children’s roles as the subjects and objects of research, so these types are not described below in as much detail as those of wedges and collaborators. What is the general distinction between children as objects and subjects in research? Sometimes researchers spend time with children, observing or interacting with them, but the

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, marketing and advertising researchers do not have such qualms, as Juliet Schor (2004) reported in her work on child consumers. Schor explained that oftentimes such research takes advantage of children’s ideas and connections without proper attribution and compensation, as opposed to true collaborative research projects like those described above.

perspective of the child is not included in analysis, and we must assume not central to the fieldwork process either—a key distinction in seeing children as objects rather than subjects of research. When children are objects, researchers assume that they can glean information about children from conversations with adults involved with them.

However, Christenson and James explain that the new paradigm in childhood studies, which developed in the 1990s, advances the premise that children's lives should neither solely be explored by talking to adults involved with children nor by only interacting with children (2000, p. 2). Instead researchers should aim to understand the child's perspective, often with their help, while connecting children's experiences to the larger societal social structure by speaking with adult caretakers, including parents and teachers—as I do in the research on children's competitive activities described above. By doing so, childhood and children become the *subjects* of study in a fuller sense than they are as *objects*.

### *Children as objects of ethnographic study*

In an article on the ethics of research with children, Virginia Morrow and Martin Richards (1996) write that “sociology of the family or education often uses adults—parents or teachers—as informants about children, so even where children are the central concern of research, they may not be directly involved” (p. 93). Examples of ethnographies that see children more as objects of research in the sociology of family literature include *The Second Shift* (Hochschild and Machung 1989) and *Feeding the Family* (DeVault 1991). Of course, these books are actually about how the adults construct worlds that involve children rather than how the children themselves navigate or make sense of these worlds, as is the case in many studies in the sociology of education.

In an ambitious ethnography about preschools in three different countries (Japan, China, and the United States) authors Tobin et al. (1989) seek to understand national cultures through the study of preschools. Hence, the authors videotaped scenes with children from three preschools, producing a 29-minute video from each country. They then conducted focus groups with parents, teachers, and administrators to see what they thought about the classrooms and the teachers' and students' behaviors. While these data certainly fit the questions the research tries to answer, one can imagine the ways in which knowing what the children thought might have deepened the cultural analysis instead of just seeing the children as objects of research.

A corresponding example about children's school life is Mitchell Stevens' study on homeschooling, *Kingdom of Children* (2003). On the one hand, this is a very comprehensive work covering the history, politics, and current key players in the homeschooling movement. However, even though Stevens detailed visits to the homes of homeschooling families and attendance at homeschooling conventions, homeschooled kids and their experiences are virtually absent from the published work.

In ethnographic works that involve children, but are not explicitly about children's lives, their thoughts are even more likely to be omitted. For example, in Gerald Suttles' classic ethnography *The Social Order of the Slum* (1970), he described the ethnic and geographic divisions of a Chicago neighborhood in great detail. Approximately one-fifth of his community study focuses on the youth of the Addams area, specifically the street corner gangs. Suttles says that the social structure for young males is very similar to the social structure that they share with adults (p. 155). Yet, most of his data, presented in tables throughout the section (much of the data in the work were presented in this way, not with narratives or quotations), was not collected by talking to members of the street corner gangs themselves. Instead, “judgments were made with the help of local adults working with each

group as a social worker or sponsor” (p. 178). Surely then the youth world would mirror the adult world, since the data were gathered from, and with, an adult perspective. Both the researcher, Suttles, and the adults trying to help these street corner gang kids essentially ignored their voices. As he chose to present them in this way, in some sense, the children’s issues in Suttles’ work both opened and closed a window into social life for Suttles. Children’s voices are more likely to be heard, however, when they are the subjects of research.

### *Children as subjects of ethnographic study*

With the cultural turn in ethnography, and the rise of feminist ethnography at the end of the twentieth century, ethnography began to move away from top-down studies like Suttles’. Ethnographers like Nancy Mandell, who articulated the need to understand children as they really are by taking on the “least-adult role” (1988, p. 433), marked a shift toward seeing children as subjects rather than objects of research.

There is a long tradition of studying children’s culture. For example, the work of linguists Iona and Peter Opie in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, originally published in 1959, showed that children form “a savage tribe” with their own society, regulations, and traditions. It is worthwhile to note that the Opies used children as sources of data, collecting songs and the like in the 1950s, long before it was accepted practice or in vogue to do so (2001, p. xxv). While the Opies’ research was indeed child-focused, more contemporary scholars would question the rigid distinction they drew between adult and children’s worlds.

Not surprisingly, given Barrie Thorne’s long-standing interest in re-visioning children’s lives through feminist methodology (1987), she treated children as subjects of ethnographic research in her landmark 1993 book *Gender Play*. Thorne spent close to a year in the field, interacting with and observing children of various ages and their teachers in the classroom. Based on her observations of children who lived in a world organized by adults (school), but nonetheless created their own social space (often on the playground), she explains that the adult/child distinction appears arbitrary. By talking to children and observing them firsthand, Thorne saw how they resisted and enhanced what the adults, whom she also spoke with and observed, were trying to convey to the kids about gender and identity.

Similarly, Paul Willis’ landmark ethnography, *Learning to Labor* (1977), was an early example of a researcher talking directly to children (especially in adult-run institutions), and studies like Eder et al. (1995) and Ferguson (2001) have continued the tradition. By working with others’ children these ethnographers learned, as did those who worked with their own children, that children can help the ethnographer gain access in different social settings and provide access to information as well. In these cases, the interactions with the children actually helped bridge a variety of divides between the children’s worlds and the researcher’s world, helping to level relationships and dampen tensions, especially of the generational sort.

It is also possible to have children as the subjects of ethnographic research outside of the school system. A good example of this is the research of education scholar Marjorie Orellana on child translators (2001). Orellana conducted interviews and did in-depth observations with immigrant children in California about their experiences translating for their parents and other members of their family. Often, the children’s experiences brought them into contact with the medical establishment, with utility companies, and other similar institutions. Orellana highlights the very real contributions that these children make to their families’ economic well-being, along with the accompanying pressures that they subsequently experience because of their great responsibilities.

Whether children are included in research as wedges, collaborators, objects, or subjects, kids make real contributions to various ethnographic studies simply through their presence, through mechanisms like dampening tensions, and through contributions to data collection and analysis. What can we learn about issues relevant to ethnographic study by thinking deeply about the implications of these roles?

### Implications for ethnographic research

Fine and Sandstrom, who wrote one of the few methodological texts about conducting research with children, suggest that using children as informants (note, not collaborators) may be helpful in terms of building trust and getting inside children's worlds (1988, p. 50). However, with the exception of the Adlers and Sinclair, who use their own children as informants, and Fine himself, who refers to informants in his work on Little League as "heroes" of the research (1987), no other researchers whose work I have read mention they used children as informants in the traditional ethnographic sense of the word.<sup>13</sup> This likely indicates that despite the various roles children can play in ethnography there still is a potential bias against taking their knowledge and opinions as seriously as an adult's (Boocock 1981, p. 96). Another possibility is that, for fear of what academic peers would think, the researcher is unwilling to say when he or she had a child informant.<sup>14</sup> But the fact is that children often help to strengthen ethnographic work not just in their roles as wedges, collaborators, subjects or objects, but also in pushing ethnographers to think about important methodological issues like reflexivity, agency, and ethics. This is because children's unique place in society, perceived as powerless and in need of protection, but also as occupying a unique social world that is often seen as foreign to adults, can help us understand the role of ethnography with different settings and populations.

The notion of reflexivity emphasizes that both social reality and research methods are socially constructed. Attention to reflexivity calls into question the role of the researcher and the method itself, especially with respect to issues of power and representation. As such, reflexivity demands a greater emphasis on the social characteristics of the researcher, like age, gender, region of origin, etc. Because of the reflexive turn in ethnography there has been a growing focus on race and the way it affects fieldwork relations (for example see *Racing Research, Researching Race* [2000] by Winddance Twine and Warren), along with gender (for example see Bell, Caplan and Karim's *Gendered Fields* [1993]).

Sutton and Fernandez state that while fieldworkers now regularly explore their fieldwork experiences in terms of not only race and gender but also nationality, class, and age, they still largely neglect the ways in which their status as a parent and the presence of a child may affect their research (1998, p. 111). While it is useful to see reflections on the ways in which children impacted the fieldwork experience after the fact, fieldworkers should consider the ways in which their families and their own status as wife or husband, mother or father, may influence the types of information they gather and the relationships they may form *before* entering the field. This is in line with the ideas of standpoint theorists, like Dorothy Smith (1989), who argue that membership in, and identity with, various social groups affects the researcher's standpoint and affects the research and final product. In

<sup>13</sup> Of course, it is possible others do and I have not (yet) read that work, or that they think of children as informants, but do not call them by that name in their published work.

<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, children's testimony is oftentimes not taken as seriously as adult testimony in court, so it makes sense that this bias would surface in other contexts.

terms of identity as mother, husband, etc., in the field, of course new and unexpected situations may arise; but if reflexive thinking about standpoint takes place early on in the ethnographic process, preferably before entry into the field, then any wedging can be incorporated into fieldnotes and analysis from the earliest stages rather than just in post-fieldwork formal accounts.

As an example, through conflicts over childcare between his family and field subjects on the Greek island of Kalymnos, David Sutton was able to experience parenthood in the community, reflecting and clarifying his ideas about culture and cultural relativism. However, Sutton admits that it was not until he returned from the field that he read Cassell's edited 1987 volume on children's anthropological experiences in the field (1998, p. 127), marking a delayed opportunity for methodological reflexivity. In that collection of chapters, Dreher, who discussed the drawbacks of having her children with her during fieldwork in Jamaica, explained how they had a reflexive effect on her as well, saying their presence provided her "with enormous insight about the way in which I carried out and combined my roles as mother, wife, and anthropologist, and certainly about the fieldwork process itself (1987, p. 165)."

In addition to encouraging reflexivity, conducting fieldwork with children can also be positive because it can empower both the children and the researchers. Like other forms of ethnography, such as "ethnographic interviewing," when researchers and subjects collaborate, particularly throughout the interpretive process, the researchers clearly respect the subject's thoughts (Heyl 2001). This is especially important to children, whose thoughts are often dismissed as inferior by adults, putting them in a less powerful position (for example, see Hood et al. 1996).

Similarly, a more collaborative ethnographic process can empower the researcher through member validation (Bloor 2001). A child can let the researcher know if the findings correspond to his or her understanding of the social world. This is particularly significant when a researcher is studying children's worlds because, even though they once were children themselves, "grown ups cannot on their own understand the world from the child's point of view and therefore they need children to explain it to them" (Christenson and James 2000, p. 8).

Because of the general power disparities between children and adults, researchers have to be very careful in the ways that they deal with ethical issues from their, usually, more powerful position. Even without considering children, the ethics of ethnography is complicated. One school of thought, the consequentialist approach, says that the outcome of the research should cause no harm. The other approach, called the deontological perspective, encourages researchers to avoid treating participants as a means to an end and to respect their right to privacy (Murphy and Dingwall 2001).

When conducting research that involves children, the ethical stakes are raised even higher than in other ethnographies. Three major ethical issues in conducting participant observation fieldwork with children of all ages must be considered by the researcher (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). The first concerns the responsibility of an adult intervening in potentially harmful situations; the second is about whether an adult should be in a "policing" role or whether he or she should instead be in a "friend" role; and the last is the problem of informed consent (Fine and Sandstrom 26, p. 1988). Based on their own fieldwork experiences, the authors suggest following the "three Rs:" responsibility, respect, and reflection.

Of the three issues, informed consent seems the most unique to fieldwork with children, since all ethnographers need to worry about being a "friend" and intervening in potentially harmful situations. To work with children though, researchers often need permission from

two sets of adults—those who regulate spaces where children are, like schools, and from parents.<sup>15</sup> These adults can also tell children to participate in the research, while making them feel as if they do not have a choice to say no.

This also opens up the possibility of exploitation when conducting fieldwork with children. Judith Stacey highlights such potential harmful effects of ethnography in general, including betrayal and abandonment by the researcher. Because children may not fully understand the research process or the consequences of saying or acting certain ways (which some could argue makes the data gathered from children more “pure” since social norms proscribe behavior less), they are at even greater risk.<sup>16</sup> This is also true for ethnographers’ children in the field, who may be exploited simply because of their presence or special knowledge of a community, and not understand the implications of what they tell a parent. They may even run the risk of ostracism by others if they come to be seen as an “informant.”

That said there are definitely ways in which conducting fieldwork with children can be more positive than fieldwork with adults. For example, in some cases it may be easier on children in the field when a researcher leaves, mainly because kids are used to adults in their lives changing frequently; for example, school teachers change on an annual basis. Paradoxically, working with children may make it harder for researchers themselves to leave the field, as in the case of Elizabeth Chin’s work with disadvantaged African-American children, especially when the children may be in less than ideal circumstances. Overall children seem to respond well without expecting much out of the researcher in the future. Of course, as with all of these points, this likely varies with the age of the child, with younger children tolerating separation better than older children who may become more attached or better understand the process.<sup>17</sup>

Although studying children may make researchers particularly aware of ethical issues, such advice about ethics, agency, member validation, and reflexivity with respect to fieldwork and children can be applied to other personal relations in the field, which can further enhance our understandings of the ethnographic process. For example, when other family members visit an ethnographer in the field, such as a sibling or a parent, this can affect access to information and the like in similar ways as with children, because it gives others a more complete picture of who the fieldworker is as a person. Jocelyn Linnekin wrote about her sister visiting her during her fieldwork in Samoa. While Linnekin acknowledged that she spent more time talking in English with her sister than integrating her into the community, at the same time she felt it was important to show her Samoan host family and friends that she also has an extended family and that she wanted her family members from home to meet her fictive family in the field (1998, p. 81–2); as with the Nichters, Linnekin was working in a society where no one was supposed to be alone, so having her sister there helped normalize her identity to the community. Others have written that when family members of the opposite sex visited, they learned about other community issues that they had not previously been able to access. This highlights that personal relationships in the field likely matter in similar ways to that of children: their physical presence helps refract the fieldworker’s identity; they can help enhance fieldwork relations

<sup>15</sup> There are other populations that require access from adults, such as prisons, but beyond that, the prisoners themselves can usually consent without another layer of authorization required.

<sup>16</sup> This is especially true for children in the aftermath of a tragedy, as in Katherine Newman, et al.’s work on school shootings in *Rampage* (2004).

<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to say more about the effects of the age of the children on fieldwork at this time (they can range from preschool to high school) because not enough is known yet. Interestingly, children’s experiences with reality TV may offer some clues, as shows like *Kid Nation* begin to use children as ‘stars’.

through mechanisms like dampening tensions or leveling relationships; and they can provide new knowledge or insight, in addition to contributions to data gathering or analysis.

### Discussion and suggestions for further research

This methodological reflection on children's roles in ethnography, based on analysis of numerous ethnographic writings and my own fieldwork experience, is a first step in thinking more systematically about children, and by extension other personal relationships, and ethnography. Within the four roles that children can play in ethnographic research—wedges, collaborators, subjects, or objects—they can affect the research process by simply being there, by activating mechanisms that help bridge divides between researchers and subjects, and by making methodological and substantive contributions to a project. As the above examples show, ethnographers have to navigate complex relationships and issues in the field, often struggling to balance their personal and professional identities, and it is both moving and insightful when they share their experiences.

While it is impossible to say if the ethnographies produced with children in a particular role, like a wedge versus an object, are “better” than one another, especially since the products are often inter-disciplinary, it is possible to consider the ways in which having children in a particular role affected the data collection and analysis in certain ways. An ethnography with a child in an object role will certainly rely more heavily upon quotations and descriptions from children or interactions with children, whereas an ethnography that had a child as a fieldsite wedge may only briefly mention the child's presence in the methods section. Again, in practice there is likely overlap in these roles, which must be considered. However, greater systematic analysis and reflection, or even public acknowledgement, of the influence of children in fieldwork would further our understanding of the process and ethics of ethnography.

One question all ethnographers who deal with children should consider is the role a child plays and the way in which he or she might impact the ethnographic process. As with Messner and the Adlers, the fieldworker's own children may shape the research topic. But children other than the researcher's also can have an influence, as with Emond's study of Scottish group homes, when the research questions shifted as children moved from being the subjects of research to being collaborators. Of course, in some cases, it may be helpful for the researcher not to have their own children, given the ethnography's focus. To illustrate, in my own research on competitive children's activities, one father told me that if I had children he would have not been as open with me, because he would have thought I was implicitly comparing his son to my child.

Another question researchers should consider when entering the field is whether or not having a father or mother as a fieldworker makes a difference for the research and for the children involved. Based on my reading of the literature, mothers appear to publish more about the issue of doing fieldwork with children—or they are expected to do so, even by their disciplines.<sup>18</sup> The title of Gertrude Huntington's article (“Different Apron Strings”), discussed in more depth below, is fitting as it highlights the often powerful connection, both physical and emotional, between mother and child. This is not to say that fathers are not also connected to their children or think deeply about their children's impact on fieldwork and vice versa; Bourgois is an obvious exception. But to what extent this is true requires

<sup>18</sup> That some women even tend to practice ethnography more often because it is sometimes seen as more “feminine” is worth noting (Stacey 1988, p. 21).

further analysis, along with deeper thinking about whether being a father in the field affects the research process differently, vis-à-vis being a mother.

Of course some ethnographers want to protect themselves, their research, and also their families. They may have to negotiate boundaries and what information is considered acceptable to reveal to others, and even among themselves, as they must sometimes open themselves to new definitions of appropriate parenting in their new communities. At the end of her book on children's baseball, in which her son and husband play a part, Sherri Grasmuck reveals:

While in the Introduction I presented many of the aspects of my identity, and of my husband's and son's identities, that have mingled with this research project, I do not wish to give the impression that I have "told it all." Given the complex role my family played in this space, I had to consider more than just how exposed I want to be...Over the course of the project, our family suffered tragedy that ravaged us, but required a social silence. This silence crept into the manuscript at various junctures and rang out to me like a trumpet. But whatever limitation it imposed on the book was worth the price (p. 219–220).

It is understandable to not want to reveal all and the fact that Grasmuck wrote about this decision shows that ethnography is moving forward in terms of more openly discussing the ways in which personal lives intersect with fieldwork.

Such discussion can only help produce better ethnography. The more researchers discuss their fieldwork experiences with children, the more we can learn about the impact of various types of personal relationships on all sorts of fieldwork experiences. Talking about the ways in which things "went wrong" in dealing with children is particularly helpful, if only so that others know that they are not alone when they encounter similar problems. In Cassell's volume, Nancy Scheper-Hughes candidly discusses one of her daughters' emotional breakdowns in Brazil and her need for psychiatric care after the fact (1987). Gertrude Huntington also describes how one of her sons was not completely accepted by the Hutterite community she and her husband were studying; importantly though, she reveals that as an adult he says he would want to do it again (1987). Huntington also says that it was hard for all three of her children to re-adjust to life outside of the field, but that assisting their parents with the analysis and writing process helped them.<sup>19</sup>

Practical advice like this is helpful and more is needed for current and future ethnographers to improve upon their understandings of fieldwork experiences, and hence produce better ethnography. Scholars like Huntington and Anne Marie Tietjen (1998) have started us on the path by compiling factors that appear to influence fieldworkers' and children's' feelings about the latter's participation in fieldwork, regardless of their ethnographic role. These include: the ages of children, with younger children appearing to be more flexible (not just because they may not be in a formal school yet, but also because they are more open to new experiences and more resilient as well); the length of time doing fieldwork (when traveling with a parent, kids seemed to do well with longer stays, not moving back and forth); the presence or absence of a second parent, or someone in the role of a second parent not necessarily involved with research, helped children adjust; and the characteristics of a fieldsite and its culture.

<sup>19</sup> While Huntington wrote about her family's experiences in this short research note, many years after the fact, it is worth pointing out that the books about this research on both Amish (1971) and Hutterite (1967) communities, and specifically on children's lives in both, do not discuss her family's experiences. The preface to the 1967 book does say she and her family lived in a Hutterite colony for an extended period of time, but that is the only mention of them.

To add to this list we need more information and data about fieldwork experiences with children. In that vein, a first step may be to interview ethnographers who have done fieldwork with children. While these would be post-hoc reflections they could contribute to formulating more formal frameworks. Additionally, ironically, much of what we know about fieldwork with children is from the adults involved, so we also need more data on what the children themselves think about studies of which they have been a part.

Of course, research like this may be of particular interest to, but potentially problematic, to IRBs. Though each university and review board has different guidelines for research, almost all request additional paperwork when the research concerns children. This can sometimes result in changes to questions, research sites, and populations—which adds another complicated layer to research with children and may add time to the fieldwork process, which should be considered when thinking about the time when entry into the field is required.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, IRBs do not address the issue of researchers taking their own children into the field, which is noteworthy.

Whatever a child's ethnographic role, the ethnographer's goal should always be to be cognizant of the need to integrate adults and children in the field and to consider the ways in which this integration shapes the final ethnographic work. This can also help ethnographers who bring other personal relationships into the field, such as spouses or partners, parents, siblings, or close friends. We need to start thinking systematically about personal relationships and roles, and “which ones are ours,” so that we can take lessons learned to the field and strengthen the method overall.

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<sup>20</sup> I was pleasantly surprised that with my fieldwork on children involved in competitive children's activities, in which I not only observe children but also conduct one-on-one interviews with them, that beyond receiving site, parental, and the child's consent and providing a detailed interview schedule (all provided in the initial application), the IRB did not change my questions or research plan.

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