

Report Anthropology of Children Seminar
Learning Session on Developing Child-Oriented Research Methods (Focus: Drawings)
15 January 2010 – VU University – Amsterdam

Literature: Lisa M. Mitchell (2006) 'Child-Centered? Thinking Critically About Children's Drawings as a Visual Research Method' in: *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 22, Issue 1, pp. 60-73.

Mienke van der Brug and Erik van Ommering (PhD candidates at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU University) give an introduction on the history of the use of drawings. In psychology, drawings have been used since the 1920s to assess children's intelligence and later on to diagnose emotional problems. Drawings are still used in psychological assessments as additional tools. In art therapy, drawings have been used in for example refugee camps and asylum seekers centres to help children express themselves. How can anthropologists make use of drawings in research with children? The process of drawing is believed to underline children's agency and to stimulate their ownership of the research process. However, it is still undefined how data from drawings ought to be processed, how elicitation based on drawings could best be designed and how they actually contribute to theoretical knowledge on children's lives.

The participants briefly elaborate on their own experiences with drawing exercises in child-oriented research or work: they have used drawings in research on notions of the dangerous other, violence and peace among primary school children in Libanon, grief and bereavement of children who lost their parents to AIDS, abandoned and false returned migrant children in Morocco, ideas about family history among migrant children in Mauritius, experiences of children with cancer in hospital, Central America, research among adolescents (comics and collages), and the use of drawings as a diagnostic tool in a one-to-one setting. Other participants consider using drawings in their future research, or would like to make use of other visual methodologies such as photography. Several dilemma's are discussed:

Dilemma 1: The interpretation of a child's drawing by a researcher provides reliable data

Dilemma 2: Drawing is child-centred: adult influence on research outcomes is absent

Dilemma 3: Using drawings is ethically problematic as it extracts information that children would withhold in interview settings

Some of the outcomes of the discussion are:

Benefits and setbacks of drawing exercises

Drawing might be easier for children than talking about certain topics, and many children really enjoy drawing. Drawing exercises can be used to start a conversation (some say it should only be used for that, not as an expression of children's inner life). In some contexts, children may not have learnt how to use a pencil, or they are expected to exactly reproduce the drawing the teacher makes instead of using their own imagination. Sometimes, children are shy, say they cannot draw (for example because they are frustrated that they cannot draw what they have in mind), or are always comparing themselves with other children. This also depends on the character and background of the individual child.

Interpretation of drawings

The researcher can always interpret some of the data, but it is very important to ask children to interpret the drawings themselves. Silence is crucial in these conversations, in order to give the children space to tell their own stories. The researcher should be aware of his or her own frame of reference, and restrain from expressing his or her own ideas about the drawings. Children can also be asked to explain what they would have drawn if the paper was bigger.

The drawing style children use may also highlight some of their perceptions. Children in Mauritius for example used straw puppets drawing big groups, while others chose to draw one or two people in detail, with beautiful clothing. The researcher may see common repertoires or patterns.

Conventions or situations should be taken into account, for example that children in certain contexts have been instructed not to draw people. Furthermore, one should be aware of peer pressure, and reflect on the fact that children in groups often copy each others drawings.

Ethical issues

We should be very cautious when it comes to our own pre-assumptions and the power relations involved in the exercises. Drawing is not an innocent activity of innocent beings. Notions on children's drawings may be very Eurocentric. Furthermore, children are highly susceptible to adult manipulation.

Some participants find the body mapping as described in the article by Mitchell disturbing because it would not respect the privacy of children. It is discussed that children should be given some space in the assignment, for example by asking them to draw 'a person' instead of 'your body'. Furthermore, children should be allowed to control their own drawings (to throw them away, to take them home, or to give them to the researcher). Moreover, it is important to deal with the information in a confident way and think about the consequences of the exercises for the children.

It is also discussed that it is in the nature of certain topics that they are difficult to talk about, but that this should not prevent us from dealing with these topics. Sometimes it is important to break through certain barriers because action needs to be taken, for example when it is about severe health issues in a certain community (as discussed in the article by Mitchell).

In order to minimize power relations one can choose for example to speak to the children two by two, or to give non-leading assignments (for instance: 'draw something of today'). However, power relations will always be part of the research (as in gender issues). What is needed, is reflection on these relations. Furthermore, if children understand that you really want to know what they think, they can feel empowered.

It is important to develop a sense of empathy with the child and a strong sense of responsibility, and to build trust. 'Desire for another child what you desire for your own child.'

Apart from drawings, other methods should be used in order to understand children's lives.

Methodology

It may be good to give children various opportunities to express themselves, for example drama, the use of pictures and drawings exercises with a broad range of paper sizes and colours. Drawing exercises can also be used to generate cross-generation talk. Or the interaction in a group of children making drawings on the pavement can be studied. Instead of using drawings as a snapshot, one can come back to a drawing and talk about it again. Drawings can also be used in combination with the word association elicitation method.