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Constructing Children and Children Constructing: A Review of Researching Children's Experiences

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Abstract

Melissa Freeman and Sandra Mathison's (2009) new book, *Researching Children's Experiences*, provides readers with a theoretically-rich presentation regarding researching children. Steeped in social constructivist informed methodology the authors explore a wide variety of methods and perspectives for not only studying children, but also enlisting children as co-researchers too. The depth and passion with which the authors embrace the social constructivist metaphor helps to make this book both novel and highly practical.

Keywords

Children, Qualitative Research, Social Constructivism

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Constructing Children and Children Constructing: A Review of *Researching Children's Experiences*

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Melissa Freeman and Sandra Mathison's (2009) new book, Researching Children's Experiences, provides readers with a theoretically-rich presentation regarding researching children. Steeped in social constructivist informed methodology the authors explore a wide variety of methods and perspectives for not only studying children, but also enlisting children as co-researchers too. The depth and passion with which the authors embrace the social constructivist metaphor helps to make this book both novel and highly practical. Key Words: Children, Qualitative Research, and Social Constructivism

Research Children's Experiences (2009), the new book by Melissa Freeman and Sandra Mathison, provides a theoretically-rich presentation regarding researching children. Steeped in social constructivist informed methodology the authors explore a wide variety of methods and perspectives for not only studying children, but also enlisting children as co-researchers too. The depth and passion with which Freeman and Mathison embrace the social constructivist metaphor helps to make this book both novel and highly practical.

The authors start their treatment by introducing their readers to children and childhood from a constructivist point-of-view. This rhetorical positioning helps to create an appreciation for understanding our understanding of childhood from a social contextual perspective as well as to remind us of the critical role children's perspectives on the experience of their being children plays in this whole scientific endeavor. The simplicity with which Freeman and Mathison make these points helps to convince us of the critical and arguably indispensable role social constructivist research can play in this area of research.

Once they have established the theoretical and methodological framework for the study of children, Freeman and Mathison delve into the real-world challenges of gaining research access to children and take on the challenges of working with this vulnerable population. Their use of the metaphor "negotiating" is quite apt to organize this discussion because of the communicative acts of not only negotiating consent from parents to interview or observe their students, but also to convince Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the positive risk-benefit ratios social constructivist-informed research can yield. This discussion of IRB's is especially important with this type of research and this population because the prevalence of recordings and the vulnerability of the population makes social constructivist research protocols involving children an almost certain candidate for full IRB review. The series of questions the authors provide on pages 35-36 provide excellent guidance for anyone preparing an IRB proposal in this research domain.

Before I discuss the procedural chapters in the book I want to give special note to the chapters Freeman and Mathison devote to the self-of-the-researcher and the ethical challenges when working with children from a social constructionist perspective. I really like how the authors take the time and pages to cover both of these critical aspects of research and I also appreciate how these sections come earlier in the book than later. By focusing on these topics at the onset the authors help to make these critical contexts front and center in the reader's attention and create a powerful lamination for the procedural chapters to come. I also think that by weaving in these perspectives Freeman and Mathison help to give their research book a more well-rounded treatment and help to align their guidance with what I see as best practices in qualitative research.

As evidence of this I suggest taking a look at Great Britain's National Health Service's Public Health Resource Unit's Critical Appraisal Skills Programme's (CASP) *Making Sense of Evidence Tool: 10 Questions to Help You Make Sense of Qualitative Research* (http://www.phru.nhs.uk/Doc_Links/Qualitative%20Appraisal%20Tool.pdf) and use that series of questions as a critical assessment of *Researching Children's Experiences* prescriptions to see if a researcher followed the suggested practices offered by Freeman and Mathison how would the outcome measure up to the CASP guidelines. Based upon my evaluation I would say if investigators carefully attended to the issues covered in this book and reported on them in their reports that the final product would be a well-developed product reflective of contemporary best practices in qualitative research.

The series of afore-mentioned method chapters introduce readers to the practical aspects of selecting and sampling research participants; data generation, collection, preparation, and analysis. Included in these chapters are not just the usual data sources such as interviewing, observation, and document analysis, but also more arts-based methods (Leavy, 2009) of art and photography. I especially like the inclusion of art because I think we can quickly forget how integral art can be in the lives of children and how that medium of expression can be such a wonderful vehicle for children of almost all ages. The abundant images of children's art provided in the chapter also help to communicate visually how powerful these graphic images can be to help us better understand the world for childhood from their own experience.

Freeman and Mathison's analysis chapter emphasizes a narrative approach to understanding and rendering data generated by the various means described in the book. The authors do a fine job of reminding us not to lose awareness of the context of the data as we make our pronouncements in our findings. Their chart depicting their framework for analyzing visual data is very effective in helping investigators consider simple, yet direct questions of the form, substance, and context of the images. I also thought the examples shared by the authors in this chapter were very effective in making what can be an overly abstract and difficult subject matter more concrete and accessible.

The last chapter of the book entitled, "Children as Researchers," was the one which really grabbed my attention and helped me to see a whole new world of possibilities when working with children. Freeman and Mathison really challenge us as researchers to reconsider our biases that can limit how we involve children in our research. The authors also take on critics who seem to dismiss out-of-hand researchers who creatively include the insights of these young co-researchers in the research enterprise. The authors' call for a "true" partnership between adult researchers and children in research about children is both liberating and provocative. To Freeman and

Mathison's credit they also include cautionary discourse in their championing of this exploration of a partnering with young people which reminds investigators of the ever-present political and ethical contexts.

Freeman and Mathison's invitation to consider innovative and bold new relationships with children in the study of childhood is a fitting ending to their book. As they ask us to consider the possibilities in re-considering the roles children can play in research about their own worlds, we must also reflect on our own limiting conceptualities of ourselves as researchers in relationship with others in this practice we call research. As I read this final chapter I found myself re-reading the earlier chapters with new considerations of how I would carry out any aspect of the research process, but now with the idea of children working side-by-side with me from beginning to end to the process. This suggested reconstruction of adult-children relationships in the conduct of childhood research re-engaged me in the text so I almost experienced the book as a new textual work as I reconsidered method design and implementation with a new partnership in mind.

Textual Features and Extras

As a learning tool, Freeman and Mathison's book features well-constructed questions and activities at the end of each chapter. I found these items well-connected with their respective chapter's content and if utilized I think they would greatly enrich the reader's or learner's experience of the material. The types of activities range from reflective exercises to research methodological procedures involving data generation, collection, and analysis which collectively help to take us as readers through the course of a child-focus research project from conceptualization to realization.

The book's web page at Guilford Press (http://www.guilford.com/cgi-bin/cartscript.cgi?page=pr/freeman.htm&dir=research/res_qual&cart_id=692727.22138) features the tome's full table of contents and the Interviewing chapter so you can get a direct experience of the book and its content. You can also learn more about the book by visiting Sandra Mathison's weblog, the Qualitative Research Café, which can be found at <http://mathison.edublogs.org/>.

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- Leavy, P. (2009). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. New York: Guilford Press.

Author Note

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