Listening to children - methods and ethics in Young Lives: a 15 year study of children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam

Symposium ‘Participation in Educational Research’
FH Potsdam

Virginia Morrow
Research Associate, Young Lives

27th November 2017
Structure of my talk

• Introduction to Young Lives

• Qualitative methods

• Examples - violence

• Specific ethics questions in Young Lives

• Some reflections
Following ~12,000 children:
• Over a 15-year period
• 5 rounds of data collection; first survey round in 2002

Two age cohorts in each country:
• 2,000 children born in 2000-01
• 1,000 children born in 1994-95

20 sentinel sites per country:
• Random selection within sites
• Balancing urban & rural locations

Attrition rate ~2.2 per cent (very low)

Multi-purpose survey - cognitive skills, nutrition, education, psychosocial skills, household background, program participation
• Household questionnaire
• Child questionnaire
• Focus on the daily lives and wellbeing of children and young people in a selection of YL communities - rapid social change and modernity/globalization

• Capture important changes during childhood and children’s trajectories - a life course approach

• Understand how policies and services are experienced by children (and caregivers) - inequalities - and who is ‘left behind’
200+ case study children & young people

- sub-sample of 50 young people in each country (equal numbers of boys and girls and younger and older cohort)
- including focus children, their carers, teachers, community representatives
- four communities (AP and Telangana, Peru and Vietnam) and five communities (Ethiopia)
METHODS

- child-focused, ‘nested’ case studies
- Individual and group activities
- creative methods + talk
- multi-actor (‘Mosaic approach’)
- flexible and reflexive
- mixed- and multi-method
Qual-1 + Qual 2 methods: 13/14 year olds

caregiver interview
caregiver interview
child interview
child interview
group caregiver interview
teacher interview
teacher interview
R1 8 year old child survey
R2 12 year old child survey
observations (home, school, etc)
group teacher interview
school transitions
child-led tour
photo elicitation
life course timeline
community mapping
who is important?
body mapping
wellbeing exercise
happy day/sad day
daily diaries
group caregiver interview
community timeline (adults)
daily diaries
understandings of poverty
community changes (children)
video making
group transitions timeline
who is important?
observations (home, school, etc)
R1 household survey
mobility mapping
group teacher interview
R2 household survey
Challenges

- Small sub-sample, risk losing participants
- Balance between interaction during fieldwork/avoid respondent fatigue
- Skills needed in researching with young children
- Talking about abstract concepts like ‘wellbeing’ ‘transitions’ and ‘trajectories’ in ways that makes sense to children
- Keeping up with changing interests, preferred ways of communicating
- Produces wealth of data
Opportunities

• Produces wealth of data
• Children ‘enjoyed’ most group activities
• Flexibility, respond to changes and differences
• Meanings, values and priorities (e.g. time-use activities)
• Processes (e.g. intergenerational transfers of poverty)
• Links to survey data and feeds into future survey questionnaires
• Identify priority areas for policy research
After 4 rounds, QLR

- Embedded within the larger survey study
- Complements other data sources - mixed methods papers
- Children’s and caregiver’s evaluations of what has shaped their trajectories
- Enabled identification of broad unifying research questions
- Was iterative - survey and qualitative protocol design feed into each other
- Enables understanding of processes behind survey findings
- Adaptable to changing research contexts, age and biographical circumstances of participants
- Useful in policy and communications - illustrating individual cases in broader context of changing communities
Example: violence

- Emerged spontaneously in qualitative research - children’s ‘well-being’, a ‘good/bad’ life
- Observed by research teams
- High rates of reporting in the survey
- Collaboration with UNICEF Office of Research - policy change in Peru
- On-going Oak funded research in Ethiopia
Key findings (1): violence is widespread

- Seen as acceptable way to respond to transgressions
- Changes as children grow older
- Underpinned by powerful gender norms - harassment (‘eve-teasing’)
- Experienced at school - corporal punishment
- Children across all socio-economic levels experience and witness violence
Key findings (2): Drivers of violence

• Intergenerational cycle of violence, eg Ravi, at age 12, sees parents fighting, tried to intervene, said of his future wife: ‘I won’t beat her...’

• But age 19, married, ‘she gets a beating... she just nags, I get angry’

• Poverty exacerbates corporal punishment: - missing school for work, being tired, not paying fees on time, not wearing uniform
Key findings (3): children’s responses

- At home - removing themselves from the situation, running away, refusing to go to school; boys/young men intervene to protect mothers/sisters
- Some children seek support from elders and other trusted adults
- But culture of silence surrounds violence
- ‘If we have difficulties, we don’t like to share them. We prefer to share only our happiness’ (Ravi)
Young Lives research ethics

- Ethics questions documented - ongoing discussions, shared enquiry
- Community consent, parents’ and children’s consent
- Consent audio-recorded
- Raised expectations (Ethiopia and Peru)
- Fear of abduction (eg Peru - linked to local myths that have a long history)
- confusion with NGOs - people ask for, and expect, help.
- Previous experiences of ‘projects’ matter
Suggestions

• Parents’ concerns can be allayed with explanations that are locally relevant: eg India, random sampling:
  ‘when cooking rice, you will take some grains and test whether it’s cooked or not, you will not check the whole rice. In the same way, we select some children...’

• Asking children to recount what they remember of the last visit
  ‘[researchers] visited, they have spoken to us, recorded the discussion... asked me to read and speak’

• Ethiopia - refusal of one child despite parents’ willingness
Other ethics questions

- Anonymity - people, locations
- Use of images
- Child protection matters - training, sensitivity to family matters
- Continuity of fieldwork staff
- Building and maintaining trust
Reciprocity

• Rewards, compensation, incentives?
• People want to know what will happen to their data
• Reporting back preliminary findings - how to do this to different audiences?
• Returning relevant information to communities helps to maintain relationships
• But realistic awareness about likelihood of change
• Saying goodbye (Crivello, et al, forthcoming)
Effects

• Wish to maintain contact

‘All the best, don’t leave us behind, come visit us always’
(Peru)

• Questions encourage reflection:

‘I have not seen any time [before] children meeting together and discussing about their matters. ... We feel happy for [researchers] mingling with us. Earlier we never speak [up] before anybody. But now we are able to speak out in front of people like you without any fear, and this helped us in having courage, ... Within these two years, we come to know how to speak with elders.’
Challenges of children’s participation

• A range of disciplines - development economics, nutrition, education, social anthropology, sociology = differing understandings of childhood?

• Economics: children as future human capital; childhood separate from adulthood. Deterministic, causal, individualised.

• Social anthropology/sociology/childhood studies: children as (constrained) social actors, lived realities of children, relational understanding. Rights, complexity, nuance.

• Tensions and limitations: futurity, profitability, instrumental view of children vs. Small scale of ethnographic/participatory work

• Numbers matter
THANKS TO…

Young Lives children, parents/caregivers as well as community leaders, teachers, health workers and others in communities

Fieldworkers, data-managers, survey enumerators and supervisors, principal investigators and country directors in each country

Oxford team

Funders: DFID, DGIS, IrishAid, Oak Foundation, Bernard Van Leer Foundation.
www.younglives.org.uk/content/childrens-work
@YLOxford

- Methodology & research papers
- child profiles and photos
- e-newsletter
- datasets (UK Data Archive)
References

