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Child-researcher relationships in child protection research. An integrative review

Johanna Kiili¹, Johanna Moilanen² & Cath Larkins³

Abstract

In research with children, particularly those in contact with social and health services, researchers face ethical challenges and have stringent ethical obligations. One obligation regards the need for researchers to adopt a reflexive approach to considering how children's perspectives and experiences are represented. In this paper, the nature of child-researcher relationships and researchers' positions are examined to further understanding of how to account for the impact of contexts on meaning making in research with children. An integrative literature review of articles concerned with child protection identified a paucity of researcher accounts of reflexivity. The review articles containing reflections on the role of social positions and relationship are analysed using Pierre Bourdieu's notions of epistemic reflexivity. Bourdieu conceives of research relationships as social relationships, where the personal history of the researched and researcher and their social positions affect research processes. Integration of Bourdieu's theory with the strategies described in the identified articles provides a provisional four-dimensional approach to reflexivity, that researchers could usefully apply in future research. Further reflexivity in social-work research with children is called for, so that understanding of the possible dimensions of reflexivity are extended.

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Introduction

Consideration of the relationship between researcher and researched and reflexivity is important in planning, conducting, and writing about research (Probst, 2015). The low rate of reflexivity in social work articles requires attention, as researchers are reluctant to situate themselves in their research (Gringeri et al., 2013). A focus on research relationships and reflexivity is particularly needed when research concerns sensitive issues. This article therefore addresses the question of how to be reflexive when conducting research with children in child protection.

This question is addressed through an integrative review of peer-reviewed journal articles written about research in the field of child protection, to identify existing strategies for understanding child-researcher relationships. In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), children are defined as people aged under 18 years. Child protection is defined, as ‘a wide range of interventions [with children considered at risk] including prevention, identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment, follow-up, [and] judicial involvement’ (European Commission, 2015).

We analyse the nature of research relationships in the literature review data using concepts of reflexivity and social relationships provided by Pierre Bourdieu (1999, 2003; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) to attempt to build on existing accounts of how personal history of researchers and the researched, and their respective social positions, affect child protection research processes. We use concepts, whilst recognising their limitations, because Bourdieu’s aim of bringing critical attention to ourselves as researchers, as well as the object of research both in its given social field and in the academic field, is vital to politically engaged social work in the twenty-first century (Garrett, 2007). Whilst treating the researcher as an object of research is an ambitious aim, and has been

defined as impossible because we cannot stand outside of ourselves (e.g. Knafo, 2016), Bourdieu at least provides conceptual tools through which researchers can try to analyse the social nature of the research relationships they experience and witness (Maton, 2003, 61).

This paper provides an account of the importance of reflexivity in research with children. We describe the integrative review process and demonstrate how engagement with Bourdieu's conceptual tools can strengthen exploration of the social complexities of childhood. We suggest an approach which may provide ethical guidance and promote more conscious reflexivity in future child protection research.

How social relationships matter?

The nature of the relationships between researchers and researched is an important ethical consideration. Academic researchers have relative security and advantages that derive from the institutions where they work that are not usually enjoyed by those with whom they collaborate (Routledge, 2004). In social work research, recognition of the vulnerability and social positions of research participants is of paramount importance (Müller et al., 2020).

Power imbalances pose additional ethical challenges in research in the field of child protection, where children and families may have experienced difficulties, related for example, to poverty, neglect, violence and substance abuse. Challenges include how to address confidentiality in the presence of serious concern about children's wellbeing, and the risk that research participants may experience anxiety when asked difficult questions. Children may feel loyalty to their parents and unwillingness to discuss painful issues. (Erikson & Näsman, 2012; Graham et al., 2015). But, understanding of child protection is limited if marginalised children are absent from research (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019b; Kim, 2016; Leeson, 2014).

In child protection research with children, various strategies have been recommended to mitigate the potential for distress and uncomfortable intrusion and to negotiate trusting research relationships which enable children's participation in studies. Researchers should be aware of the cultural background and social history of the individuals they are doing research with (Daly 2009) but challenge their protective assumptions when designing research in child protection and actively engage children in sensitive and cooperative ways (Leeson 2014). Young people in care can plan research methods and formulate research questions (Daly 2009). Children's agency should be acknowledged and ethical and methodological decisions should be made together with, not for, children (Houghton 2015).

Whilst research has repeatedly evidenced the ethical imperative for child protection social worker to practice reflexivity (Featherstone & Gupta, 2020; White, 2009), child protection researchers themselves pay inadequate attention to their social positions and to strategies for reflexivity about ethical and methodological challenges (Ergler, 2017; Khoja, 2016). It is vital to recognise the relationality and interdependence of children's lives (Spyrou, 2019), meaning that in research with children the researchers should also reflect on the dynamics and complexity of the social and to consider how the voices of children are represented, who represents them and for what purposes (Åkerlund & Gottzén, 2017). Without sufficient attention to reflexivity in research relationships with children researchers risk perpetuating symbolic violence, that is using methods that are exclusionary or interpreting children's ways of speaking and acting as 'meaningless and insignificant' (Warming 2011, 49, citing Bourdieu, 1996, Bourdieu et al., 1999).

Integrative literature review

To explore how child protection researchers currently engage with reflexivity within their research relationships we conducted an integrative literature review, which aims to summarise and synthesise

research from a diverse range of methodologies and to provide an inclusive understanding of a phenomenon (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Whittemore et al., 2014). Criticism has been levelled at integrative review methodologies as integrating diverse data sources and various methodologies may complicate data analysis and synthesis (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005, 549-550), critical analysis of the literature may be cursory (Torraco, 2016, 408-409) and the inclusion of a wider range of potentially empirical and theoretical sources may render quality appraisal demanding (Whittemore et al., 2014, 458). We addressed these potential limitations, avoiding cursory analysis, by ensuring that all sources were explored using deep theoretically informed analysis (see also Kiili & Moilanen, 2019a; Kiili & Moilanen, 2019b).

Four rounds of searches were made. The first searches were made in December 2017 and January 2018, with complementary searches in August 2019 and September 2019. The searches used five electronic databases: ProQuest Social Services Abstracts, ProQuest Sociological Abstracts, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), IngentaConnect and Academic Search Elite (EBSCO). To be included in the review, studies had to meet the following inclusion criteria: 1) focus on children's perspectives of or within child protection (including foster care and looked after children), 2) peer-reviewed, 3) published in English, and 4) published between January 2007 and June 2019. Various combinations of search terms were used to capture the topic of interest while maintaining the focus on research about child protection practices (see Figure 1). Additional search strategies included a review of the reference lists of candidate articles, and non-systematic searches using Google Scholar.

The initial search based on abstracts and subject or key words indicated a large number of studies (7 575), published in a variety of fields. Records were subsequently screened according to the inclusion criteria, their titles and the availability of abstracts. The inclusion criteria were tightened to restrict the search to studies concerning children aged under 18 years and studies where data had been collected, at least in part, directly from children themselves. Screening based on these revised criteria

yielded 468 studies. Full-text articles were then read and assessed for the eligibility by the first two authors. Duplicate articles, literature reviews and methodological or theoretical studies were excluded if they contained no primary empirical research with children in contact with child protection systems. This resulted in 187 obtainable articles. In the final stage of screening, studies were excluded where the primary research focus was not seeking children's perspectives in or about child protection but rather, for example, assessing learning outcomes, schooling or criminal behaviour. Where multiple articles based on a single research study were found, only the most comprehensive one was included. Articles written by the present authors were also removed.

After the four-step screening process, records were finally reduced to 109 studies. These were evaluated according the identified focus (presence of content related to research relationships), not the empirical results (Evans, 2007, 143), as this was considered a more relevant evaluation than using a specific scale or tool.

(Figure 1. here)

Characteristics and analysis of the reviewed studies

Most of the reviewed studies were conducted in the UK (27) and US (23). This was predictable given that the search was confined to publications written in English. The remainder had mainly been conducted in Minority World countries, namely: Sweden (6), Norway (5), Spain (5), Australia (4), Ireland (4), Netherlands (4), Canada (3), New Zealand (3), Italy (3), Finland (2), Estonia (2), Portugal (2) and South Africa (2). The search also yielded studies from Belgium, Bulgaria, Chile, Germany, Ghana, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Lithuania, Nigeria, Serbia, Singapore and South Korea. Of the 109 studies, 72 used a qualitative design, 28 a quantitative design and 9 a mixed-methods framework. The two most frequent publishing journals were *Children and Youth Services Review* (25 studies) and *Child & Family Social Work* (22 studies).

Our theoretically informed thematic analysis started from the development of summary themes within the extensive data (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Ward et al., 2009). The two first authors read the 109 selected articles noting preliminary ideas for themes. In the first round of analysis, 62 articles were selected for closer scrutiny and analysed in depth⁴. Discussion on research relationships was more common in qualitative studies (53/72) than in quantitative (6/28) or mixed method (3/9) studies. The research activities reported referred to forming and transforming interpersonal relations (researchers, children, professionals) as well as broader level of interrelated social fields (academia / university, family, child protection) that are involved in the (re)production of research practices of connecting, speaking and hearing.

In the second round of analysis three strands of Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit provided insight into the emerging summary themes analysis. First, Bourdieu highlights the nature of research as a *social relationship* as, in the historical existences of individuals and through their current practices 'all kinds of distortions are embedded in the very structure of the research relationship' (1999, p. 608). Into these social relationships researchers and researched bring their reflexes and dispositions (habitus) and social, cultural and economic capitals accrued from the personal and professional pasts. This social relationship is also situated in the context of actual and past social realities that extend beyond but reach into the researcher-researched interaction. For example, Khoja (2016) described her own habitus as a disposition to recognize young children's competence, but she acknowledges that 'cultural assumptions regarding the capabilities of young children' affected how social and cultural contexts shaped the ways children could express themselves in her research relationships with young children.

⁴ The data (research articles) is alphabetically listed in the appendix. The articles (62/109) where the authors discuss researcher-researched relations and the positions of research participants are marked with *.

Secondly, Bourdieu calls for '*epistemic reflexivity*' (e.g. Wacquant, 1992) and awareness of '*objectivation of the knowing subject*' [italics added] (Bourdieu, 2003, pp. 287-288). Epistemic reflexivity requires that the researcher reflect on the object of research (the researched phenomena), its formation, and the conditions associated with that formation. This requires that researchers reflect on the social conditions of disciplinary knowledge as well as of the researched phenomena (Wacquant, 1992; Deer, 2008). Awareness of '*objectivation of the knowing subject*', requires that the researcher avoid dominating research subjects with their own perceptions of the situation. So, the researcher should, as an observer, seek to explain the situation studied by asking the questions why, how and what for (Bourdieu, 2003, pp. 287-288) and examine how social locations are connected to processes of knowing. This can help researchers understand how values shape observations (Gringeri et al., 2013, p. 55, referring to Pascale, 2010). For example, Åkerlund and Gottzén (2017) emphasise that in research with children exposed to domestic violence, the researchers are often seeing children conventionally as vulnerable victims. Children's perspectives which diverge from this conventional notion may not be heard or understood unless the researcher takes steps to avoid dominating the researched subject with their misconceptions.

Thirdly, Bourdieu draws attention to how research, despite the aim to do no harm, may perpetuate '*symbolic violence*' as social science research often engages with people living in the most disadvantaged social positions. Symbolic violence, which occurs when individuals are socialised into accepting the legitimacy of dominant values, distributions of capitals and power inequalities, despite these potentially being harmful, may be 'exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). In research, Bourdieu describes that a 'market of linguistic and symbolic goods [is] established every time an interview takes place' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 609) and that there is significant potential that dominant values will dominate (Bourdieu, 1999). For example, Jenkin et al. (2019) describe symbolic violence in research with children, when Western

researchers import views of childhood, disability and ‘development’ into research in the global south. This perpetuates colonial conceptions that normalise deep injustices.

The three stands of Bourdieu’s work described are used to discuss what is and is not currently reported in child protection research, following four themes: 1) Professional positions in forming research relationships; 2) Commonalities and disparities in cultural positions; 3) The feasibility of speaking and hearing; and 4) The possibility of shifting social positions through co-research.

Understanding research relationships in child protection research

The professional positions in forming research relationships

In some (18/109) papers, researchers reported their professional and historical positions and expertise connected to working in child protection or similar settings (e.g. health care), and their professional qualifications (e.g. paediatric nurse, or social worker). In a few (10/109) papers, these historical existences were implicitly portrayed as a resource for building research relationships, as researchers had ‘*backgrounds in child welfare, group works, and adolescent development*’ (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010, p. 48) or historical professional experiences with children in care helped researchers to provide ‘*a research environment that promotes warmth, invitation, and trust*’ (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010, p. 438). In these studies, there is a sense that researchers were reporting that they have familiarity with the field being researched.

Disparities in generational and professional positions were mentioned in a few articles (9/109). These researchers reflected on their own generational positions and the power imbalance between the researched and the researcher’s academic resources and professional status (e.g. Dillon et al., 2016; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013; Nourian et al., 2016; Winter, 2010; Wong et al., 2019). For example:

Finally, the issue of power imbalance between an experienced researcher and two young people cannot be ignored. This could have resulted in the creation of a paradox, whereby the voices of NI and BC (young people) were dominated by that of CBJ (researcher) by virtue of her relatively powerful position. (Taylor et al., 2014, pp. 398–399)

In majority of the articles, there was a lack of acknowledgement of the privileged social positions, when compared to the children participating in the research. Relationships to essential resources (capitals) and social histories (habitus) within the field were explored only in one paper and mainly in relation to researchers' pre-understandings of the phenomenon:

In the first step, researchers wrote about the means of creating personal and professional motivation for studying the phenomenon (...) Maintaining openness to the phenomenon, researchers put aside their pre understanding before and during interviews and refer to them later in the process of analysis (Nourian et al. 2016, p. 2).

The benefits and potential bias arising from forming relations through direct historical professional connections were discussed in other studies (8/109) (e.g. Dillon et al., 2016; Sindi & Strömpl, 2019; Rasmusson, 2011; Winter, 2010). Direct historical professional connections with participants enabled access but was acknowledged by some as also causing bias: *'I was already known to some of them may have influenced their responses and thus introduced some bias'* (McLeod, 2010, p. 774). For some authors, the benefit of professional connections outweighed the risk of bias. For example, Rasmusson (2011, p. 310) emphasised that familiarity with the researcher is of paramount importance when considering the best interests of the child; research-relationships with strangers can do more harm than good. Winter (2010, pp. 187-188) suggests that the tension between the risk of *'a high degree of bias in the findings'* and the benefit of familiarity should be resolved by not underestimating

the importance of social and emotional proximity. In contrast, in three studies (Woolfson et al., 2010; Cooper, 2012; Husby et al., 2018), unfamiliarity with the individual children or research settings was viewed as beneficial or, at least, not an obstacle, as long as interviewers are familiar with children (Woolfson et al 2010). Cooper (2012, pp. 487–488) stresses the importance of ‘independence’ from the setting, in order to reassure children about confidentiality.

The tension between familiarity and bias in the studies above link to Bourdieu’s notion of epistemic reflexivity, drawing attention to the fact that research participants may alter what they say according to who they are talking to. There is a relative lack of epistemic reflexivity in the other direction, regarding researchers altering what they hear or choose to ask according to who they are researching with. Learning from Bourdieu, reflexivity also involve consideration of when and how researchers’ professional histories may impact the construction of the research object (the data). Transparency about this in the reporting of research would be beneficial. Nieuwenhuys (2008, p. 7, citing Bourdieu 1997) emphasises that in relation to children’s rights we should ‘*look not only at what is said, Bourdieu would say, but also at who says what about whom*’.

Measures for resolving the tensions between the benefits of familiarity and unfamiliarity that arise from historical professional existences were rarely reported. One approach was that ‘*a mixture of children both known and unknown to the principal investigator should be invited to participate*’ (Dillon et al., 2016, p. 73). Whereas Pösö et al. (2018, p. 92) describe how children were given the option of choosing to be interviewed by either their own social worker or the hitherto unknown researcher and argue that the possibility of exercising choice was important for the children, even if choice was limited as they were unable to suggest alternative interviewers. Those researchers, who enable children’s choice might be seen as starting to name the dominant values and accepted power differentials which may circulate in the space of child protection and research relationships by trying to disrupt adult/child, researcher/social work client hierarchies in which children are subjected to

decisions by others. This may be a first step towards unpicking the potential for symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167) by challenging the normalisation of adult-led process.

Commonalities and disparities in cultural positions

Cultural context was briefly discussed in a few papers (9/109), along with notes on institutional and cultural practices of communication. Echoing Bourdieu (1999), sharing the same cultural background was seen to assist researchers in building rapport with participants and enabling a more active role for children. For example:

It is important to note that the interviews were conducted by trained interviewers who belong to the same culture and cultural context as the participants and this contributed to more openness and a willingness to participate. (Schiller & de Vet, 2018, p. 243)

Although shared cultural contexts were raised, only a very few (3/109) researchers explained the benefits. Schwartz (2010, p. 35) argues that having co-interviewers with the same background as those being researched helps to minimize the social disparity. If cultural background is not considered, respondents could experience discomfort and be reluctant to report emotions and attitudes in the interview setting (also Rogers et al., 2018). Parker and McLaven (2018, p. 112), emphasise the importance of acknowledging '*individual's perceptions and how these are shaped and constrained by context and culture*'. Here Bourdieu's notion of research as a social relationship and the need for epistemic reflexivity might be usefully considered together, to unpick the extent to which cultural backgrounds, dispositions and capitals are shared (or not) and to report how these commonalities and differences affect what is generated and recognised as data.

A few studies reported how researchers adopted or tried to create common institutional and cultural communication practices. Søftestad et al. (2012, p. 606) adopted '*local cultural practices of*

communication' by viewing assessment interview videos of children in order to develop communication and understanding of children who were subsequently interviewed. However, the authors offer no further reflection on what is meant by 'local cultural practice' and how it affected the data collection process. Yeste et al. (2018) imply that a shared culture was established in the space of research by conducting interviews in a way that '*overcomes the interpretative gap between the researcher and the participants*'. The dialogic communicative space they were studying was perceived as safe, however the way in which this novel communicative technique assisted interviews was not elaborated. The researchers report the children's socioeconomic background and emphasise the importance of the children's personal knowledge; state that intersecting social characteristics did not have any effect when the children participated in the DLGs; but give no account of whether these experiences affected the research relationships. (Yeste et al., 2018, pp. 65–66.)

The question therefore remains of whether common communicative cultures can be established in research relationships to overcome gaps in understanding and interpretation. Bourdieu (1999) argues that it is challenging for people to overcome their social locations and form egalitarian relationships free from their habits, individual dispositions and personal histories and the relatively enduring nature of social inequalities is well established in the field of social work and child protection. It is therefore surprising that, in the methodological and ethical deliberations of the 100 other articles reviewed, the ways in which cultural locations influence communication, and interpretations of social phenomena and possibly produce intergenerational connections or conflicts were largely unexplored. This indicates the need for greater epistemic reflexivity, to more comprehensively consider the influence of social, historical and cultural contexts and the interpersonal exchanges between participants and researchers.

The feasibility of speaking and hearing

The third theme present in the reviewed articles overlaps with the former themes but focuses on how social positions and personal histories affect how children communicate, and the extent to which researchers can hear what is communicated. Some articles (11/109) recognised that difficulties in building relationships with children may be due to children's prior negative experiences of professionals and officials who have not listened to them or taken them seriously: '*Several of them had bad experiences of adults in general and of officials in particular*' (Severinsson & Markström, 2015, p. 3). Children in child protection systems who have experiences of adults imposing their views might be selective about what they are willing to share with researchers (Cossar et al., 2014; Buckley et al., 2011; Emond, 2014; Leeson, 2007; Rogers et al., 2018; Wood & Selwyn, 2017). In much the same way, historical existences influence what researchers are willing to say. Recognising research as a two-way *social relationship* may reinforce the need for attention to the question of how historical existences may impact on children's and researcher's dispositions to hear and speak in research interactions.

Current organisational and professional practices in child protection were also reported (7/109) as making the creation of opportunities to speak or listen difficult (e.g. Balsells et al., 2017; van Bijleveld et al., 2014; Leeson, 2007; Seim & Slettebø, 2011). For example, Leeson (2007) indicates that personnel in an institution have social positions which enable them to determine whether the institution takes part in research or not, making staff members the gatekeepers of opportunities to speak to researchers:

... as a key member of staff in one agency went off long-term and the home felt they could not continue to support the work. This served to illustrate, quite vividly, the power of the adults to control the lives of the boys, who had been keen to participate and were disappointed when this did not happen. (Leeson, 2007, p. 271)

Here gatekeeping professionals may be understood as perpetuating epistemic injustice, in that implicit and naturalised conceptions of children inform how professionals experience and interpret their encounters with children and exclude children from opportunities for knowledge creation (Murriss 2013, p. 257).

The key question of how research environments can be made into spaces that facilitate comfort with speaking and listening is directly discussed in few (8/109) articles (e.g. Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Rogers et al., 2018; Schiller & de Wet, 2018; Sindi & Strömpl, 2019). For example, Moss (2009, 314) describes how young people chose the interview environment, and for that they '*had some agency and ownership of the process and thus felt more comfortable*'. The sparsity of these articles is surprising given that research environments arguably lie at the heart of the researcher-researched relationship in child protection and are often mentioned in other fields of childhood research (e.g. Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Graham et al., 2015).

In child protection settings, children are encompassed by systems of regulation and control which render invisible the economic and social inequalities that make it more likely for some children than others to be in contact with child protection services. Here again, Bourdieu may prove useful in pointing a direction for inquiry, namely how might research relationships redress children's and professionals' historical experiences which act as barriers to communication, and how might these relationships be established by unpicking any *symbolic violence* to create environments where it is more possible to see, hear and speak about the injustices that are rendered invisible or accepted as legitimate.

The possibility of shifting social positions through co-research

Some researchers (15/109) reported engaging children in research as co-researchers or advisors, arguing that children in care have a distinct standpoint enabling them to better understand the realities

of other children and how these realities influence the research process and the ways data should be collected (e.g. Cossar et al., 2014; Rogers et al., 2018; Sindi & Strömpl, 2019, Winter, 2010). This has implications for researcher-researched social relationships (theme 1) as it is not only about adult researcher positions guiding the process but also children's expertise and social positions in subsequent relationships and epistemic claims generated with other children. This may also be a strategy for overcoming gaps in understanding, interpretation and voicing that arise from cultural disparities (theme 2) and the possibilities for speaking and listening (theme 3).

Co-research encompassed a variety of approaches. Some researchers reported recruiting children as peer interviewers (e.g. Taylor et al., 2014), co-researchers (e.g. Rogers et al., 2018; Sindi & Strömpl, 2019) or co-facilitators (e.g. Cossar et al., 2014). Some researchers consulted with children on the most appropriate data-gathering techniques (such as interview techniques and questions) (e.g. Barnes, 2012; ten Brummelaar et al., 2018; Mullan et al., 2007). In some studies, children were asked for their views on the interpretation of the data (e.g. Barnes, 2012; Hong & Goh, 2019; Percy-Smith & Dalrymple, 2018; Van den Steene et al., 2018). Children also advised researchers on ethical issues in research (e.g. Cossar et al., 2014; Mullan et al., 2007).

A few articles (9/109) included reflection on the benefits of co-research. It was seen to assist in the empowerment of children, promoting their rights or bringing about wider social change (e.g. Sindi & Strömpl, 2019). Co-research was seen to intensify children's sense of agency and give them a platform from which to exercise their rights, and it was hoped that this would have a far-reaching impact beyond the researcher-researched relationship. Researchers also emphasised their duty as professionals and researchers to empower children and provide them with resources (e.g. Leeson, 2007; Rogers et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2014; Winter, 2010), implicitly acknowledging the difference in social positions.

The identified benefits (peer support, study designs that are inviting and understandable, and greater diversity in data analysis) are consistent with Bourdieu's notion that when researcher-researched relationships are flexible and give participants opportunities to influence research activities, they also enhance researchers' possibilities of gaining a deeper understanding of participants' lives and of engaging in 'active methodical listening' (Bourdieu, 1999, pp. 609–610). But, it might also be recognized that, as with adults, a young co-researcher engaging in research '*shapes, and is shaped by, the situated aspects of the researchers' social selves and the "invisible determinations" inherent in the scholarly gaze*' (Townsend & Cushion 2021, cit. Wacquant, 1989, p. 252).

Attempts to shift out of prior social positions into new relationships was only rarely made explicit in articles reporting co-research. This means greater consideration is needed of whether and how it may be possible for adults and children to step outside of their prior historical selves and current social positions, in order to enable children to direct all available capital and shape the overall research aims, design and outcomes of the research (Bourdieu, 2003). This may require academics to be open about their positions as researchers (and sometimes as professionals) and the responsibilities for retaining some decision making that come with these. It may also require greater attention to co-reflexivity with co-researchers.

Discussion

This literature review yielded insights on how child-researcher relationships have been addressed in child protection research with children. The analysis confirms that more reflection is needed on the social conditions of child protection research with children and on the nature of social relationships between children and researchers. Only very few examples were found of researchers engaging in epistemic reflexivity or considering the potential for symbolic violence, by reflecting on, sharing with participants, or reporting their professional and cultural positions in relation to children and the

research design. This is despite the fact existing literature on ethical research with children (e.g. Atkinson, 2019; Ergler, 2017; Khoja, 2016) recognises that research is not something that can be performed in isolation from research contexts or the research participants' experiences.

Learning from those few child protection researchers who have incorporated elements of this reflexivity in their practice provides a provisional four-dimensional approach to reflexivity, that researchers could usefully apply in future research. This comprises considering the affordances and barriers arising from both adults and children's historical selves and professional and social positions in forming research relationships; understanding potential commonalities and differences in cultural and generational positions; enabling speaking and hearing; and shifting social positions through co-research.

Within each of these dimensions, attention is needed to the question of the potential for *objectification of the subject* and *symbolic violence* in the implicit assumptions, language or distribution of capitals. As Graham et al. (2015) state, research is shaped by the attitudes, values, beliefs and assumptions of the different stakeholders, not by specific ethical and methodological procedures or 'checklists' as such (see also Bourdieu, 1999). Roets et al. (2015) emphasised the need for reflexivity regarding the perceptions, rationalities, and interpretations of social workers as they easily occupy and maintain a privileged power monopoly towards children and parents. Kim (2016) points out that opportunities to participate in research are too often made available only to children judged to be capable of doing so by child welfare professionals and researchers. Research conducted in this way may become another marker of childhood inequity and inequality (also Kiili & Moilanen, 2019b), where a careful understanding of social relationships is not at the centre of the research activity. So, there is also need for attention to the potential for child protection researchers to perpetuate symbolic violence in the values, attitudes, language, and in control of capital. This might include unpicking uncritical acceptance of gatekeeping and conceptions of who is protecting what in child protection systems.

Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019) propose that the role of adults in child-led research is to facilitate, not manage. Moore, Noble-Carr and McArthur (2016) take this further, to suggest co-reflexivity in research with children and young people. They suggest reflexivity focuses too often only on researchers and their backgrounds; co-reflexivity is a process that enables research participants also 'to take a step back' and critically reflect together on the methodological, ethical, and epistemological assumptions and engagements. Combining this with learning from our study, and being in the core of 'Bourdieuian reflexivity' (Wacquant 1992, pp. 35–46), the role of adults facilitating child-led research might extend to enabling critical co-examination of the dominant role usually occupied by adult researchers and professionals, and how the habitus, capitals and histories of researchers, participants and their contexts shape the research. This participatory approach to using Bourdieu's conceptual tools could usefully be explored in further research, including the possibility of co-reflexivity with stakeholders in decision-making roles, as well as children.

Reflecting on the child-researcher relationship is not an easy task. Usually, peer-reviewed research articles lack the space to discuss the complex challenges faced during the research process. At worst, this leads to "sanitized" descriptions that mask the dilemmas and problems involved in e.g. collecting data from children (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). It is necessary to question if it is 'fair' to study research relationships and the ways they are reported in academic articles, as has been done in our analysis. But it is equally important to consider whether it is fair to not explore these issues. The enduring questions might therefore be: why is this aspect (the research relationship) omitted in strict word limited articles about child protection, rather than other ethical questions? Should it be given priority over other issues in research with children?

Limitations

This review focused on journal articles, which means that it did not cover all studies in the child protection research field. Moreover, unindexed studies, studies published in grey literature, theses and dissertations are not represented. The fact that the majority of studies were reported in English and conducted in Minority World countries means that cultural and policy differences must be critically appraised when pondering the wider meaning and applicability of the results. Our emphasis, however, is on the need to decolonise assumptions within child protection research, which we believe has wide implications.

Conclusions

Research on child protection often critically reflects on professional practices, whether and how child protection systems might meet the needs of children with diverse backgrounds, and whether children's views are heard within these. However, it is equally important to critically examine existing child protection *research* practices and the possibilities for children to be heard and understood and represented within these. At its best, research, like child protection systems, gives children access to resources, shifted social positions and experiences, recognition and new insights on their rights. To fulfil this potential, this paper confirms the need for transparency, and to critically question social positions, personal histories, objectification of research subjects and symbolic violence. Epistemic reflexivity is needed, for child protection researchers to be more explicit about their professional selves and become more aware of how their social background and scientific interpretations and the specific traditions within which they work affect their research and the social positions and assumptions they bring into these contexts. It is important that these reflections become more conscious rather than remain tacit. (Bourdieu, 1999; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992.) We found that Bourdieu offered conceptual tools which enables deeper reflexivity on these issues in ways that echo

thinking amongst some child protection researchers. Two questions remain. First, how might academics be encouraged to engage with reflexively, for example with Bourdieu, to facilitate change in research practices. Answering this may help address the second question: how can we dismantle the barriers to greater parity in co-research with children in child protection settings, including engagement in co-reflexivity?

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Figure 1. Search and screening process.

Search terms:

"child protection" OR "foster care" OR "looked-after children"
AND participation OR engagement OR children OR young people, "children as clients" OR "children's participation OR involvement"
OR "young people's participation OR involvement" OR "voices of children OR young people" OR "decision-making" OR
"consultation" OR "children's wellbeing OR welfare" OR "children's lived experience" OR "children's perspective OR young people's
perspective"

Search results:

ProQuest Social Services Abstracts 1390
ProQuest Sociological Abstracts 1488
ASSIA, Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts 3193
EBSCO, Academic Search Elite 1460
Ingenta 44
Total: 7 575

Inclusion criteria on the basis of title:

Focus on child protection practices
Unclear if study meets up with the selection criteria
Abstract is available

Basic inclusion criteria:
Published 1.1.2007–30.6.2019
Written in English
Peer-reviewed

Abstracts:

ProQuest Social Services Abstracts 117
ProQuest Sociological Abstracts 103
ASSIA, Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts 127
EBSCO, Academic Search Elite 119
Ingenta 2
Total: 468

Inclusion criteria on the basis of abstract:

Study has to relate to children and young people under the
age of 18
The data in study is collected at least partially directly from
children and /or young people
The data is collected from children and /or young people as
clients in child protection services
Unclear if study meets up with the selection criteria

Full-texts:

ProQuest Social Services Abstracts 82
ProQuest Sociological Abstracts 11
ASSIA, Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts 52
EBSCO, Academic Search Elite 42
Ingenta 0
Total: 187

Exclusion criteria:

Duplicates
Not available through databases at disposal

Inclusion criteria on the basis of full-text:

Empirical study
The data in study is collected at least partially directly from
children and /or young people
The focus on child protection practices is respected in the
data gathering process

Exclusion criteria:

Research question is not incorporated in themes on child
protection practices

Studies included in data analysis:

ProQuest Social Services Abstracts 52
ProQuest Sociological Abstracts 5
ASSIA, Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts 15
EBSCO, Academic Search Elite 17
Ingenta 0
Manual search 20
Total: 109