Introduction

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This Introduction outlines key themes of the volume. The centrality of reflexivity is emphasised by its introduction, application, and arguably neglected status in much research with children. As the chapters are outlined, the reader is taken on a journey representative of the research process. This begins with content that explores ethical governance, followed by an examination of methodology and methods. The focus moves onwards through critical reflexive discussions of how particular voices are privileged and/or marginalised. Finally, through reflexive considerations of the emotional labour embedded in doing research with children and the possible mistakes we make along the way, we demonstrate the usefulness and adaptability of reflexivity as a research tool hitherto mostly overlooked in childhood research. The reader has the opportunity to see how this reflexive approach is applied across sensitive topics such as sex, gang membership, conflict, death, and disability in the international, empirical discussions offered here. This volume emphasises the need to make such reflexivity far more prevalent in research with children.

Reflexivity is a nebulous, complex, and expansive concept that calls for our ongoing acknowledgement and engagement with participants, selves, positions, research fields, and wider contexts. Furthermore, reflexivity requires the researcher to continually survey themself as an integrated part of the research landscape and recognise the effect that they have on all aspects of research, through the topics chosen to the questions asked and the knowledge produced.

We argue that research with children is often ethically, emotionally, and morally charged, and yet little evidence of this is to be found in journal articles, research books, and conference presentations. Perhaps this absence is in part due to prevalent discourses, which surround and immerse children in constructions of vulnerability that in turn dictate how we present our research discussions. This vulnerability rightly makes ethical practice paramount in our research and yet leaves little room for self-doubt, reflection, or contemplation of the moment-by-moment decisions we make in the field. As researchers, we meet the academic rigour of the discipline and are confident in presenting
the ways in which we have privileged children’s voices but nonetheless, often remain silent in relation to our dilemmas, decision making, and any particular incidences that may occur. We do not seem to want to reveal ourselves or share the nuances and arguable ‘imperfections’ of our craft. Yet, we argue that this anxiety is unfounded: participatory research with children is well established with sound methodological underpinnings, is ethically robust, extensively used, and has tried and tested key concepts and methods. Despite this methodological maturity, such reflexivity remains predominantly neglected. In feminist methodology, the centrality of the researcher is commonly made explicit as a research instrument, and the multifaceted features of reflexivity evidenced as an invaluable methodological tool. If reflexivity, and its companion concept positionality, were to become more overt in research with children, then conversations about researcher identity, the emotional labour involved, the ethical and moral dilemmas we face, the ambiguity of the decisions we make, and the mistakes sometimes made, could occur.

Positionality as a concept refers to the attributes and characteristics that we each bring as researchers to the field. These shape our perspectives and understandings of what we see and inform our interpretation and analysis. Who we are as individuals characterises who we are as researchers, and informs not only what we see and how we respond, but also what our participants see and respond to when interacting with us. Our ethnicity, gender, age, for example, all become relevant to our data and its interpretation. Yet few of these characteristics are identified within texts that explore research with children, as we seek to understand the claims made by individual researchers. In contrast, this volume reveals some of the positionalities of the authors, which illuminates why they make the claims they do and enables the reader to more fully situate their analysis. It can be argued, therefore, that positionality enhances the validity of research with children by exposing the attributes of the researcher and providing more transparent and trustworthy accounts. Making our positionalities explicit begins the process of reflexivity.

Why have these ideas become so embedded throughout feminist research but not within research with children? With the proximity of childhood and feminist methodologies it seems perplexing that our research discussions lack these debates. We consider that one aspect continues to relate to the assumed vulnerability of children and therefore the implications this holds for research and the actions of researchers. This constructed vulnerability ensures that we are hesitant to disclose the complexities and extent of our experiences for fear of ‘doing the wrong thing’ and being identified as unethical. The consequences of this can be detrimental to careers and reputations. As identified by Heather Montgomery in this volume, ‘owning our mistakes’ is something we may feel more comfortable with from the security of a well-established career, rather than from the outset, but even here it is rare.
We argue that this absence of dialogue is detrimental to the field of study and to early-career researchers who interpret our published discussions as unburdened, unproblematic, and washed clean of all uncertainties the researcher may have faced. New researchers may therefore enter the field with idealised notions of the ease with which this methodology can be exercised. Consequently, they are often unprepared for the multiple ways in which their research identities will be challenged and changed, their ethical practice tested, key concepts confronted, and the inevitable emotional labour and involvement demanded of them. The longer we stay silent the further we become complicit in the perpetuation of the ‘cherished conceits’ of this methodology (Clark and Richards, 2017). Furthermore, a great disservice is done to those who follow. Our edited volume seeks to address this deficit and expose the messiness, challenges, and realities of this approach, and the choices that we make. Such discussions reverse the perceived vulnerability away from the child and onto the researcher by calling us to openly highlight our own uncertainties and dilemmas in the field.

To prevent wrongdoing in research with children we quite rightly have robust ethical principles, ethics committees, and guidelines to follow; we also have gatekeepers, layers of supervision, and peer review practices. These are in place to ensure that our practice is beyond reproach, but it could also be argued that they effectively mute discussion of predicaments that we all face both in the field and in pivotal moments during our research. Yet feminist methodologies manage to embrace these reflexive discussions in a more honest, open, and transparent way, while still adhering to these principles. Reflexivity, from this perspective, strengthens rather than undermines the methodology. Researchers learn from the discussions, struggles, and dilemmas articulated by others. We argue, therefore, that feminist researchers are more prepared for the unpredictability of research, the emotional intensity of fieldwork, and the recurring self-doubt involved in decision making. In contrast, childhood researchers have seldom read about, and therefore do not expect to encounter, such intricate predicaments. It is the decisions we make in such moments, both mundane and extraordinary, that reveal who we are as individuals and researchers. Furthermore, it is our continued consideration of the research decisions we make that reveal our ethical and moral positions. Reflexivity therefore becomes an ethical and moral endeavour, essential for the researcher and for childhood research methodology.

Contributors to this volume take steps towards embracing reflexivity within their research in all its complexity. Within this volume the reader encounters ethical discussions, where governance and approval are interrogated. This theme is followed by consideration of how reflexivity can be embedded in methodological debates, methods used, and the doing of research. This volume then provides critical discussion of how voice, as a key methodological concept, is situated and reproduced within research and
practice. Finally, we explore how our research decisions can remain with us, as unresolved dilemmas, far beyond the life of our research. This structure provides the reader with insights into how reflexivity can be rooted in, and utilised across, each stage of the research process and beyond. The reader will witness, through the disparate chapters within this volume, the expansive nature and application of this concept from the individual and personal to the methodological and philosophical. Reflexivity therefore provides us with new ways of seeing, being, and thinking within our research, thus making childhood methodologies stronger and the researcher arguably more resilient.

Research with children is quite rightly organised through a robust set of ethical principles that inform the ways in which children should be involved, and what topics are considered appropriate for investigation. Despite the rigours of these guidelines, Michelle Lyttle Storrod explores their limitations in regard to consideration of the researcher. She highlights the neglect of ethics committees to support the well-being and mental health of researchers. Lyttle Storrod’s choice of topic and population exposed her to viewing extreme online violence and explicit online content, as a result of decisions made by an ethics committee and gatekeepers, who exclusively focused on the implications for the children and young people involved. Tsameret Ricon and Michal Dolev-Cohen confronted a similar ethical emphasis when unsuccessfully applying to explore an aspect of sexuality with young people, ethical approval being refused on the grounds of it being an unsuitable topic for children to be exposed to. It is therefore the confrontation between the social constructs of childhood and sexuality that they interrogate.

Sensitive topics, populations, and geographies are also picked up in the following chapters. Pallawi Sinha reflexively interrogates childhoods on the peripheries. She equally explores the consequences and impacts of colonialism on perspectives of childhood and how these childhoods are researched. In observing reflexivity broadly, across ontological, epistemological, and methodological debate, she successfully delegitimises established knowledge positions. Ayushi Rawat challenges the notion of what a taboo topic is within the realms of childhood research by engaging children’s perspectives of a red-light area and a conflict zone. Rawat highlights the necessity to perform various identities in order to be socially accepted, culturally competent, and successful in her research. Rawat then reflexively considers the usefulness and application of her methods, in examining such sensitive topics with vulnerable populations. Marianna Stella and Allison Boggis demonstrate how thinking about our decisions across the whole of the research process must be open to adaptation and change in order to fit participants, topic, and context. This consideration extends to what we do with the research in the final instance and how we might disseminate or share it with others.

The next chapters then confront our understandings of the voice of the child. Katie Tyrrell challenges the notion of voice as a singular entity and
instead considers the co-production and collaboration that constitutes voice. She identifies the significance of safe spaces and contexts, where young people are more comfortable and empowered to share their views, and calls for greater recognition of the co-production of research more generally. Samia Michail then examines the limitations of child voice, identifying its use as more rhetorical than realised within safeguarding policy. She speculates how voice might be implemented in practice, in order to increase the relevance and application of children’s perspectives in policy development and social work practice.

The final two chapters consider the emotional labour involved in research with children and how we reflexively interrogate and continue to question and reconcile ourselves with the incidences that occur. Sarah Coombs and Sarah Richards consider how the methodologies that literally and metaphorically underpin their research, the palimpsests that lie underneath it, inevitably influence their responses in the moment and the subsequent tensions and anxieties they experience afterwards. In this chapter we see how a ‘sensitive topic’, a ‘vulnerable population’, the central tenets of feminist methodology, our present and past identities, collide to form a mass of entanglements. Fully conversant in acknowledging the expected emotional labour of caring for their young participants, they found themselves faced with unexpected and more searching questions to answer. Reflexivity challenged them to share their experiences, rather than hide them away.

Heather Montgomery, retrospectively wrestles with trying to make sense of what we do as researchers; the decisions we make, the promises we break, and the impact this has on us personally. Montgomery, like Lyittle Storrod, questions if examining the emotions, feelings, relationships, and ethical dilemmas within our research might appear rather self-indulgent. However, Montgomery goes on to contend that in acknowledging the moral and ethical dilemmas we face, by exploring our often ‘turbulent’ feelings within and about our work, we become more honest about our experiences and uncover an often ‘uncomfortable and ambivalent relationship between researcher and informant’ (Chapter 9). Such insights call for greater reflexivity, even though this scrutiny might make us uncomfortable and perhaps reveal details we would rather forget.

The chapters illustrate key ideas that we wish to promote further in research methodologies with children. The first being the multiple selves we each bring to research. Twenty-five years ago Reinharz (1997) was arguing that we not only bring ourselves, but also create ourselves in the research field, and this self emerges as a result of both context and the relationships we develop with our participants. Furthermore, she contends that these identities that we bring and create in the research process, shape and/or obstruct the relationships we develop as researchers, and thereby inform the knowledge constructed. It is ourselves, therefore, who shape our research
endeavours and its outcomes. Reinhartz categorises the variety of selves we bring to the field: primarily the research-based self, who is a good listener, a researcher, and someone who can ultimately leave the field; the brought self, where attributes supposedly outside of the research encounter actually play a significant role, such as gender, ethnicity, parenthood, age, and our personal interests; and finally, our situationally created self, which can only emerge in each specific context and through particular interactions with our participants. We argue that these claims remain salient today and highly pertinent to childhood research, yet they seem to have gained limited traction in normative research debates within the field. This volume will provide examples of the multiple selves we each bring to our research, as well as the selves we create with our participants.

Stella and Boggis explore research-based selves and the need for those selves to be flexible and continually adaptive to the situations that arise throughout and across the research process. Rawat discusses her situationally created self as ‘guest-daughter’, in her interactions with gatekeepers and the hosts that made it possible for her to reside and be accepted within the community in which her research took place. Tyrrell focuses on the co-production of research, emerging through her relationship with the young people, which calls for a recognition of the researcher-based self as plural and inclusive of participants. Ricon and Dolev-Cohen explore their brought selves as mothers in a topic relating to young people and sexting. Lyttle Storrod identifies a brought self as a social worker, yet acknowledges a vulnerable self when exposed to online gang-related activity. Ultimately, she accounts for the emergence of a more resilient self that was situationally required in order to complete her studies. As a consequence of her experiences, her research-based self demands change in ethical governance, to protect other researchers intending to research this field. Nevertheless, she continues to carry the resulting traumatised self. Coombs and Richards identify several brought selves, which were shaped by the sensitivity of the topic, the particular context, and the characteristics of the participants. The emotional labour required by this research ensured the centrality of other selves as pivotal to the nurturing interactions with young participants and the resultant responses in the moment. Montgomery subsequently identifies the ways in which her brought self is confronted by the actual context in which she finds herself and the experiences her participants shared. Furthermore, she highlights the ways in which research identities and brought selves are changed as a result of research encounters and the implications this has for current selves after the fieldwork is completed. Therefore, our brought and situational selves are inextricably linked to our research-based selves and the knowledge we produce. We argue that the presence of these selves and our positionalities should be more explicit in our published texts, and reflexivity provides us with the means to do this.
If we are willing to bring ourselves into our research landscapes, then our emotional selves inevitably accompany us. Excitement, anxiety, hope, ambition, determination, and stress all form part of the emotional tapestry we weave into our research encounters. Like positionality, our emotions, hidden or overt, are productive in determining what we do, how we respond in situations, and the emotions felt by our participants. Therefore, emotions become embedded in research encounters and, we argue, should be explicit in our reflexive practice. As researchers, we are emotionally invested in our work, and conducting research can represent emotional labour, perhaps particularly so when working with children in difficult and challenging circumstances, where injustice, abuse, and marginalisation are evident. However, emotional labour is also present when exploring sensitive topics with children such as death, sex, gangs, and war, as many authors have done in this volume. Being ethically sensitive, while nevertheless probing children’s lives for information and knowledge about contentious topics, calls for sensitivity, nurturance, and a willingness on the part of the researcher to emotionally invest in the children. Emotional detachment, therefore, has no place in such endeavours and we argue that this emotional investment should be made explicit in our reflexive writing.

A further unifying theme across the chapters is a call for change and for research with children to move beyond the simple celebration of agency, voice, and participation. This methodological and political clarion call asks us, as childhood scholars, to follow where disability studies has led, by demanding greater benefits and more action for our participants. Sinha critiques the universal construction of childhood and highlights the ways in which such dominant concepts are not useful in exploring the experiences of all children. In a similar way to Rawat she emphasises the need for an Indian sociology of childhood, to better situate and understand the lived experiences of these children through the application of more appropriate discursive concepts. In a further challenge, Michail argues that the implementation of child voice from research into practice is sporadic, inconsistent, and ultimately a betrayal of children’s participation. She calls for the resituating of children’s voices into the wider political landscape to better apply their perspectives into social work practice. Stella and Boggis also illustrate this call for change in how, as researchers, we use the voices of arguably marginalised participants, and question who these voices belong to. Furthermore, they then explore how to continue the privileging of such voices within the dissemination of findings, where the researcher’s voice is muted in order to retain the integrity and authenticity of the participant’s voice. Tyrrell extends this discussion of voice by emphasising its relational and co-produced nature, whereby as researchers, if we acknowledge such co-productivity, then the authoritative singular voice, found in research texts, would be undermined. Refusing children a voice, in research, is confronted by Ricon and Dolev-Cohen as
they challenge the regulations and boundaries around the topics in which children are allowed to participate, calling for a relaxation of the rigid ethical boundaries that tie up and impede research into so-called sensitive topics. Rawat further justifies this claim by demonstrating the ways in which children can successfully be included in such topics, whereby ethical governance too often acts to refuse rather than permit access. While still focusing on ethical governance surrounding children, Lyttle Storrod moves the focus onto the lack of welfare and consideration for the researcher. She calls for ethical consideration of the impact that witnessing such unadulterated data can have on their well-being. The researcher as an emotional self is further highlighted by Coombs and Richards, as they call for the recognition of emotional labour in research to be more transparent. Research with children can be fun yet intensive and can hold a degree of uncertainty. Revealing such emotions in our research texts would enable the emotional burden of doing research with children to become more explicit. Such emotional revelations are found in Montgomery’s discussions, where she provocatively and persuasively demands that we recognise our privilege as researchers, acknowledge our limitations, and reveal our uncertainties, as well as account for and own the mistakes we make.

The aim of this volume was to gather together research that utilised reflexivity, and engaged reflexively in research with children. Clearly, reflexivity is an expansive notion that can be applied widely across all aspects of research, from ontological positions to epistemological and methodological questions, and further to global and political context and issues. Through the chapters that follow, we see multiple ways in which this concept has been incorporated as a central tenet of research methodologies with children, and the intricacies and insights it reveals. Furthermore, we see how it is used to shine a light on the quiet decisions we make, grant us permission to share and discuss these, and bring our emotions and uncertainties to the forefront of debates rather than hiding them away for fear of the repercussions.

What emerges through these chapters is a call to move beyond simply capturing the voices of children, and, rather, to involve ourselves in a more reflexive, meaningful, and far-reaching encounter with our co-producers of research, the children. This call for change is challenging, it demands an extensive paradigm shift in how we research, the topics we choose, and the populations we involve. It seeks a deeper acknowledgement and exposition of self, position, power, and thinking. It involves further consideration of how we present our research, including revealing our omissions, errors, and indeed our multiple selves. Finally, it anticipates a moral imperative to do something that improves the lives of our participants, if we can. Clearly, this is a broad ask but, as the following chapters show, it seems the time is right to move forward in methodologies that research children and their childhoods reflexively.
References
