



Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods, and Ethics. M. Elizabeth Graue and Daniel J. Walsh. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998. 270 pp.

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Studying Children in Context, by Elizabeth Graue and Daniel Walsh, is a methodological guide for conducting interpretive studies of children. The book focuses on the “process of finding it out,” or how researchers should go about the laborious but fruitful task of studying children in day care centers, schools, backyards, and other places. Research is conceived thematically as a child-centered process that in every respect is “situated” within the contexts of children’s lives. The book’s topics are organized according to traditional methodological categories. But content is presented with attention to contemporary trends in qualitative research. Each author’s “voice” is identified by letting the reader know who wrote which chapters. Both authors’ prose is translucent and personalized rather than obtuse and pedantic. Scattered throughout the text are “boxes” that contain citations, research tips, and other useful information. There are detailed case studies, researcher reflections, and other materials that shed additional light on what researchers actually do in, and with, their work.

Chapters 1 through 5 provide an overview of the interpretive research process. The first chapter challenges prior quantitative research and criticizes the hegemonic hold that Piagetian theory has had on studies of children. While this critique is provocative, the problems associated with past research are overstated. The authors do, however, present good arguments for why interpretive studies ought to take more precedence in research on children. Chapter 2 presents a discussion on interpretive science that provides a nice segue into the next chapter focusing on theory. The author, Walsh, does a fine job of explaining how theory is applied and produced in interpretive inquiries. He makes a distinction between “Big-T and little-t theory” which clarifies the differences between major theories accepted within a field and theories that are more peculiar to individuals and contexts. This chapter ends with brief overviews of post-Piagetian perspectives and other modern (and postmodern) theoretical frameworks. The discussion on ethics in chapter 4 is disappointing. The author, Walsh again, views ethical behavior essentially as “an attitude” whereby adult researchers assume the posture of humble observers who suspend “moral evaluations” of children’s actions. The reality of ethical behavior during fieldwork is that it involves principled, often conflict-ridden responses to unanticipated dilemmas. “Moral evaluations” are inevitable and often are necessary to protect participants from harm. Although the chapter does conclude with an account of a researcher’s efforts to work through an ethical dilemma, the main discussion provides little guidance regarding the types of dilemmas researchers might face and how they might go about resolving them.



Another concern is the omission of any discussion about the regulatory oversight of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Investigators in research institutions who study people must have their research protocols approved by IRBs in order to ensure that they meet ethical standards protecting the rights of human subjects. As an IRB member, I know how grueling the approval process can be for researchers who plan to study children. I encourage the authors to tackle the topic of IRBs in subsequent revisions of the book.

Chapter 5, written by Graue, offers insights into how researchers negotiate their roles. The choices researchers make about their roles are affected by epistemological positions, power dynamics, and other factors. While these insights are interesting, I would have liked to have read something about dual role negotiations in action research and other research designs whereby practitioners study their own practice. Such negotiations can be very tricky, especially when children are involved.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on fieldwork. Many useful suggestions are given for how standard qualitative data collection methods can be adapted to studies of children. While these suggestions are worthwhile, they gloss over the issue of diversity. As I was reading the section on interviewing, I recalled Shirley Brice Heath's classic study of African American children (*Ways with Words*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). The children were not familiar with the kinds of information-giving questions asked in school and, I suspect, by many qualitative researchers. An awareness of differences in interactional, language, and communication styles is vital for establishing rapport with, and understanding the perspectives of, culturally diverse children.

The next two chapters, written by Graue, focus on interpretation (data analysis) and writing. Graue walks the reader through the interpretation process with an in-depth analysis of data she generated on the readiness of a kindergartner named Jared. She explains how she went from raw data to theoretical vignettes. That Graue is keen on vignettes is very clear in chapter 8. Vignettes are "narrative snippets" that crystallize issues in a manner that provides opportunities for readers to interpret analytical themes in context. While vignettes are wonderful ways to illustrate interpretive themes, they are not necessarily the best way to present findings. As Graue herself points out, the "boundaries of writing have broadened considerably in recent years" (p. 209).

Overall, the strengths of this book outweigh its weaknesses. The book would be not only an excellent textbook for introductory research courses but also an informative reference for seasoned researchers. It is a big step in the right direction.