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Background

This is a small qualitative study drawing on memories of childhood. It examines social change in childhood related to war, migration, employment, policing, technology, popular culture and religion, and how children and their families navigate childhood. It also explores how children’s experiences influence children’s everyday lives? How do children practice childhood in relation to these influences? The sample were selected in relation to their personal experiences and social change. The research therefore must be accepted as involving personal, selective and constructed accounts of children’s experience. However, the research is not based on fabrication. It is grounded in real events from the past, related to children’s experiences and social change.

Children engage with selective social memory

Halbwachs (1925/1992) distinguishes between different forms of memory, drawing attention to the ways personal memories are chained together through familial and other collective memories. These ‘social memories’ provide ‘social frameworks’ for individuals to make sense of the world. Each social encounter is therefore also an encounter with the past. My research explores the relationship between children’s experience and collective forms of memory related to family, community and nation.

‘… it was my grandmother that basically kept the family going… she worked in a factory… that made men’s shoes. She used to take off the parts… for years, she kept two families fed, by wearing shoes to work and earning pounds of answers down her wellies, by sending them round her legs… so when you think of that weight of them, and having to normally walk’ Apa

This is a story of a ‘heroine’ committed to her family’s welfare. The memory shared with the child celebrates this, containing education about the family, community and nation.

Children navigate social landscapes

Lefebvre (1995) argues that places are historically produced from interaction. Children’s movements between public and private spheres has changed over time. Places may encourage entry for some and deter others. Children actively engage with the landscapes they occupy. These convey social memories of times past. Combining Halbwachs’ approach to memory with this approach enables lines of research enquiry to be drawn from personal experiences to the landscapes children occupy and how they engage with these.

‘My dad decided that we were going to do some voluntary work… it was on the river… we were really surrounded by water… teenager… who couldn’t stop fighting with my … brother… and acting like a right old brat. Had to feed the poor… my Mum was putting food on the plate and I was giving them the plates. This queue of hundreds of people… I was going to turn about… I wanted to go back!… I felt this knot in my throat… It was just horrible… I was crying!… don’t you dare cry, because these people are homeless, hungry, have got nowhere to live, and you’re going to turn about!’

This memory involves strong emotion at a personal level. In addition, it reveals the relationship with father, who encourages her participation, passing on familial memory to the British born girl this aspect of her Indian heritage. The tradition of giving to poor people is a collective memory of the better off to assist the poor. The requirement to bury into tears… I was totally oblivious … the next minute, I’d been kicked and punched on the floor by three grown men I was only a tiny, little, skinny girl… if it wasn’t for the police, I don’t know what would have happened.’ Lara

The sexual attack remains unarticulated for many years. The racial attack has to be acted on because of Lara’s physical injury. She has no formal way to understand the sexual attack. ‘… or you think it’s your fault. Lara is more prepared, but still deeply shocked… my mum used to always say to us, “Don’t ever walk with your head down”. Both attacks are minimised.

The terms ‘flashed’ and ‘playing with himself’ are ‘cliches’ in the social memory. Third, there may be stories that are collected as accepted as involving partial, selective and constructed accounts of children’s experience. However, the research is not based on fabrication. It is grounded in real events from the past, related to children’s experiences and social change.

Children experience sensory silence in the social memory

Children’s experience may remain silent, insufficiently informing social memory. Firstly, children have little power to be heard, important experiences remain unarticulated. Second, experiences may be trivialised in ways that suit particular interests. Third, there may be insufficient social frameworks for them to understand and describe what is happening. Fourth, social arrangements may be taken for granted, a naturalised part of childhood. There are ‘fossils’ and ‘clitches’ in the social memory.

‘I remember being flashed… in a bus queue… I was 14 or 15 maybe. Allowed to go to town on my own on the bus… I was sitting in the middle of a bus queue, and there’s this guy with a Mac behind me, playing with himself when I turned round, and you just think you’re imagining things, or you think it’s your fault. It was probably years before I told anyone.’ Julie

‘[aged 13] I was just waiting for the bus, and National Front rally going on… as they did in those days, and a few of them must have come down… I was totally oblivious… the next minute, I’d been kicked and punched on the floor by three grown men… I was only a tiny, little, skinny girl… if it wasn’t for the police, I don’t know what would have happened.’ Lara

Spatial memory is unarticulated.

Children weaves time and space for themselves

Temporal influences in childhood (Adam 1995) involve the bodily times of development, times of the household, school, industry and environment. Childhood is a time of complex transition. Our sense of time involves, ‘memories in the present of the past, expectations and desires in the present of the future’ (Jaques1982/1990: 22).

Children’s everyday lives are complex temporal engagements that weaves time and space for themselves.

‘We had a leaving do at the end of primary school… “Girls will be wearing skirts and dresses, boys must wear smart trousers,” I said, “I’m not going,” My mother had battled with me prior to that, to send me to children’s parties, to the parks, to the last one of which I came home with it rolled up under my arm, I’d been up a tree the while time… with field hockey’. And the all the lace was hanging off, and I was covered in dirt… became a bit of a “New Romantic”… with all the scarves and the pirate look, that was an identity. That was quite fluid paneric wise, that was something I became quite sure of, so you had bat George and Adam Nighty and you didn’t know whether they were male or female, and that was like, now, that’s really interesting, I like that Rachael

The choices of gender fluidity in fashion reflects Rachael’s sexuality at 15 together with her thoughts in dressing. To some extent, this is why the fashion is acceptable and the fashion is captivating. She selects this clothing with reference to her own interests and cultural signals. Her negotiation of clothing intersects with social ideas about respectability from interconnected systems related to gender, class, race and religion. The global popular culture industries have presented some fashion options. Out of this Rachael creates space and weaves time for herself.

How layers of memory informed the research

It is important to acknowledge that the accounts of childhood discussed in this research have been filtered in different ways. First, the respondents selected memories from childhood that were filtered through their subsequent experiences and ideas about childhood. Secondly, the respondents remembered memories in collective memories from further past. Third, academic debates about childhood informed the way the researcher constructed the research. Fourth, the researcher’s memories of her own childhood were a significant filter.


Selected references


Memory, Space and Time: Researching Children’s Lives
Dr Dorothy Moss, Leeds Metropolitan University

2010