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Memory, Space and Time: Researching Children's Lives

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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, considering the ways these influence children whether or not they are directly caught up in events. The central questions are, 'How do wider social, cultural, economic and political events and systems influence children's everyday lives? How do children practice childhood in relation to these influences?' The sample were selected in relation to their professional commitment to children and their diversity of childhood experience. This poster gives examples of the way the sensitizing concepts of social memory, space and time have informed the research.

Children engage with selective social memory

Halbwachs (1925/1992) distinguishes between different forms of memory, drawing attention to the ways personal memories are channelled through familial and other collective memories. These 'social memories' provide 'social frameworks' for engaging with the everyday. Each social encounter is therefore also an encounter with the past. My research explores the relationship between children's experience and collectivised 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 meat products. She used to look after the pigs … for years, she kept [two families] fed, by wearing wellies to work and stuffing pounds of sausages down her wellies, by winding them round her legs … So when you think of the weight of them, and having to normally walk.' Apara

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 potential of women to overcome adversity. The undercurrent is hunger associated with the depression, the struggles against the owners of capital and the legitimacy of law breaking in this situation. The politics informing the story is from working class struggle (Apara's mother's family were socialists). In this way, Apara's experiences as a child are informed by a familial and collective past. The memory belongs to the family archive and is formative in her childhood, transmitting past events, a political position, a sense of pride and amusement.

Children navigate social landscapes

Lefebvre (1991) argues that places are historically produced from interaction. Children's movement 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 Ganges … I was a really spoilt, young teenager… who couldn't stop fighting with my … brother … and acting like a right old pest … we had to feed the poor … my Dad was putting food on the plate and I was giving them the plates … This queue of hundreds of people … I was gonna burst into tears … I was like… "Don't you dare cry, because these people are homeless, hungry, have got nowhere to live, and you've been moaning endlessly" … I had this knot in my throat … It was just horrible seeing that poverty… my Dad and I never really talked about why we did it …' Madhi

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 personal feelings is a strong part of the religious tradition; sublimation of self and personal desire. This is a response to poverty in an unequal society with little organised welfare. The place is highly significant; along the Ganges, a sacred place, where the tradition is enacted. Madhi experiences shame at her 'selfishness' and attempts to sublimate emotion to navigate this landscape.

Children encounter 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 'clichés' 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 stood … 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

'I [aged 13] 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 these 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 injuries. Julie has no framework 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 social clichés that minimize the sexual abuse of Julie (Haug 1992). The National Front 'rally' provides a context for the attack on Lara. People gathered to incite each other to racial violence. The police men support Lara but the weekly 'rally' remains un-policed.

Children weave time and carve 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 involve weaving time and carving 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 just said, "I'm not going." My mother had battled with me prior to that, to send me to children's parties, in the party frocks, the last one of which I came home with it rolled up under my arm, I'd been up a tree the whole time … with frilly knickers! And all the lace was hanging off, and I was covered in dirt… I became a bit of a 'New Romantic'… with all the scarves and the pirate look, that was an identity. That was quite fluid gender wise, that was something I became quite aware of, so you had Boy George and Alison Moyet and you didn't know whether they were male or female, and that was like, wow, that's really interesting, I like that.'Rachel

The choice of gender fluidity in fashion reflects Rachel's sexuality at 15 together with her thoughtfulness in dressing. To some beholders her sexuality is blurred and the fashion is captivating. She selects this clothing with reference to her own feelings, peers 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 Rachel carves 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. Firstly, the respondents selected memories from childhood that were filtered through their subsequent experiences and ideas about childhood. Second, the events respondents remembered were grounded 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.

Childhood is filtered and altered through these different layers of memory. The research therefore must be 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.

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