

Chapter 1

Theoretical Grounding on Children's Participation in Research on Maltreatment

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Abstract

Drawing on key concepts from childhood studies, this chapter provides a theoretical grounding for children's participation rights in research on maltreatment. The chapter discusses the sociology of childhood, tracing how it brought a focus to children's participation in research, and introduces the concepts of adultism and childism to help critique children's participation in research on maltreatment. The chapter is framed by a familiar debate on tensions between children's right to participate and their right to protection. It explores the relevance of these debates for research on child maltreatment. Through its discussion, the chapter explores key issues that have traditionally led to children being kept out of research on child maltreatment. It argues that children's participation is key to advancing knowledge on child maltreatment and fundamentally a way to uphold children's human rights. The concepts introduced in this chapter are threaded and explored throughout the subsequent chapters of the book, in their examination and reflections on children's participation in research on maltreatment.


Keywords: Children's participation; sociology of childhood; childism; adultism; children's rights framework; participatory research

Introduction

Children's participation in research is important to improving and developing knowledge and the evidence base on child maltreatment. It provides a means to gain critical insights on maltreatment from children – the group most affected and

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marginalised by child maltreatment. It allows us to answer critical questions like: How do children experience and understand maltreatment? What impact does maltreatment have on their lives? How might law, policy and practice be improved to better support children and ameliorate the impacts of maltreatment?

Without children's participation, knowledge on child maltreatment is at risk of being partial and efforts to protect children could be ill considered and ineffective. As well as contributing to knowledge, children's participation is key to implementing children's human rights. It is a way to facilitate children's representation, to ensure their interests and views are heard, taken seriously, and prioritised in policy decisions about child maltreatment (e.g. [Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020](#)). It also has the potential to be transformative for children, both individually and collectively. It can be empowering and support children's activism and action in addressing child maltreatment (e.g. [Houghton, 2015](#); [Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2020, 2022](#)).

However, children's participation in research – especially research on child maltreatment – is complex and contested. Adults may be concerned about children's vulnerabilities, including the extent to which they may manifest and can be reconciled in the research process. These concerns often surface in questions around children's capacity to participate, whether children have adequate levels of knowledge or expertise to participate and the potential negative consequences of participation for children. This can be especially acute in research that invites children to share or draw on their experience of maltreatment. Although participation in this area is complex, a focus on protectionism at the expense of children's participation risks denying the most marginalised children the opportunity to be heard, the effects of empowerment and achieving positive change at an individual and collective level that can emanate from participating in research.

Drawing on key concepts from childhood studies, this chapter provides a theoretical grounding for children's participation in research on maltreatment. The chapter discusses the sociology of childhood, tracing how it has brought a focus to children's participation in research and introduces the concepts of adultism and childism. It explores children's human rights, elaborating on children's participation rights. Through its discussion, the chapter explores key issues – children's capacity, knowledge and expertise and the impact of participation on children – that have traditionally meant children are excluded from research on child maltreatment. The theoretical concepts introduced in this chapter are threaded and explored throughout the subsequent chapters of the book, in their examination and reflections on children's participation in research on maltreatment.

Theoretical Devices for Thinking About Children's Participation in Research on Child Maltreatment

This section introduces key theories from childhood studies. They are used to unsettle assumptions about children and childhood. This discussion highlights issues like capacity, questions about children's knowledge and concern about their

vulnerabilities that could limit children's participation in research on child maltreatment.

Sociology of Childhood

The sociology of childhood, a key theoretical strand of childhood studies, emerged in response to and as a critique of dominant child development and family studies paradigms about children and childhood. Taking insights, particularly from sociology and social anthropology, researchers argued that childhood was socially constructed (Mayall, 2002). As such, childhood is not a stable concept; rather, it is influenced by particular ways of thinking about children and childhood, cultural norms and academic disciplines. Broadly speaking, in the Global North, proponents of the sociology of childhood have argued that the lenses of child development and family studies had been overly dominant and wrongly characterised children as incomplete and wholly dependent on adults. These characterisations viewed children as 'adults in waiting', with a resulting policy and research focus on children's future productivity in adulthood. Childhood was as a stage to be completed before the ultimate goal of adulthood achieved. As Qvortrup (1994) notably stated, children are constructed as 'human becomings', not as 'human beings':

Adulthood is regarded as the goal and end-point of individual development or perhaps even the very meaning of a person's childhood. They are however revealing for the maybe unintended message, which seems to indicate that children are not members or at least not integrated members of society. This attitude, while perceiving childhood as a moratorium and a preparatory phase, thus confirms postulates about children as "naturally" incompetent and incapable. (p. 2)

Qvortrup (1994) questioned the status afforded to children in society, arguing that children are not treated as full 'members', or at least not 'integrated members'. He raised a concern that children's competence and capacity were in question, or rather that children are assumed lack of competence and capacity. Proponents of the sociology of childhood assert that rather than understanding childhood as a preparatory phase as noted by Qvortrup, it should be understood as a social category, much like other categories of race, gender, and disability. Like these other social categories, childhood is worth considering in its own right and should be understood to be a social construction and socially constructed. Prout and James (1990) explained this effectively: 'A child's immaturity is a biological fact: but how this immaturity is understood and how it is made meaningful is a fact of culture' (p. 7).

So, although children are biologically immature, how society and adults respond and ascribe meaning to this is a cultural issue. Embracing the sociology of childhood calls for a paradigm shift – from viewing children through the prism

of child development norms to viewing children and childhood as socially constructed and deserving of greater respect. The sociology of childhood marked a departure from a traditional view of children as wholly passive and dependent on the family (Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup, 1994). It called for respect of children in the present, not in terms of their future contribution as adults. It demanded greater respect for and acknowledgement of children as social actors and holders of rights. This all has implications for how we think about and involve children in research. James and Prout (1990) outlined a new paradigm for understanding and researching children and childhood. Several points are especially salient for our consideration here on research on child maltreatment:

- Childhood is a variable of social analysis.
- Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right.
- Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their social lives, the lives of those around them and the society in which they live.

This paradigm of childhood was and continues to be part of challenging and reconstructing how children and childhood are conceptualised. It aims to unsettle dominant constructions of childhood in the Global North, where children were characterised as being vulnerable, dependent, innocent and incompetent. Instead, it calls for recognition of children's expressions of agency and rights. Adopting a sociology of childhood lens has profound implications for children's participation in research on child maltreatment. It encourages us to reject the assumption that children are wholly vulnerable and dependent on adults. Instead, it encourages a view of children as having contributions to make to research and rights that must be fulfilled. Research strategies that privilege and emphasise adult perspectives and responsibilities are called into question. A traditional orthodoxy of research about children (and research on child maltreatment), where the views and experiences of children have been filtered through the accounts of adults, must be overhauled – adults cannot be seen to be proxies for children. Rather, research on and resulting responses to child maltreatment must recognise children as individuals in their own right – individuals with integrity, individuals with status and individuals who should be able to choose whether and how to participate in research that affects their lives. Thus, through the sociology of childhood, the child becomes a, if not the, central actor in research (Christensen & James, 2008), including in research on child maltreatment.

More radical social movement ideas of oppression and discrimination are beginning to be articulated in childhood studies through the concepts of adultism and childism. These constructs recognise that unequal power relations between adults and children create attitudes, systems and institutions that privilege adult norms and subordinate children (see Alderson, 2020; Sundhall, 2017; Wall, 2022). In research on child maltreatment, this may manifest in excluding children from research due to adults' concerns about their capacity, knowledge or vulnerability,

rather than perceiving children as key to research and their views and experiences as relevant to understanding and addressing child maltreatment. Such attitudes may not be maliciously intended, and researchers working in these domains may be acting with the best of intentions. However, there is danger that privileging these concerns and perceptions creates systematic disadvantage, discrimination against children and oppression of children as a group. In adopting a childism lens, we see that children's participation is necessary – as is the reimagining research to be inclusive of children.

Children's Human Rights

In parallel with the sociology of childhood has been the growth of the children's rights movement (Mayall, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted by the UN Assembly in 1989 and has been vital in advancing children's human rights across the globe. Countries may ratify the UNCRC and then become obliged to make the rights that it enumerates for children a reality. Although the word 'participation' does not appear in the text of the UNCRC, it is the term used in the children's rights field to encompass the requirements of Article 12 of the UNCRC and other associated rights. As well as being the most cited participation right of the convention, Article 12 is also recognised as one of the general principles of the UNCRC by the [United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child \(1991\)](#),¹ thus highlighting its importance and standing across the convention.

Article 12 of the UNCRC ensures children the right to participate in all decisions that affect their lives. It requires that:

- (1) States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
- (2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Articles 13, 14, 15 and 17 further outline children's related participation rights regarding freedom of expression; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; freedom of association and access to information.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child provides further and extensive guidance through its general comments on the interpretation and the implementation of the UNCRC. As authoritative interpretations of the UNCRC, the general comments provide a detailed framework by which we can consider

¹The other three general principles are the right to non-discrimination (Article 2); the best interests of the child (Article 3) and the right to life, survival, and development (Article 6).

implementing children's participation rights in a research context. The general comment on Article 12 ([United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009](#)) elaborates on the implementation of children's participation rights. It implies that children's views should have influence on decision-making, encompassing decisions made about an individual child and collective decisions about children. Therefore, interpreting Article 12 demands an expansive understanding of children's participation, from individual decisions about children's lives to their broader participation in the development of policy and research on child maltreatment. The general comment on Article 12 defines participation as follows:

This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialog between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. (p. 3)

In a research context, children have the right to participate in research that affects their lives, including on child maltreatment. From a rights perspective, participation is more than data collection; it extends beyond collecting children's views or data about children. Rather, participation is understood to be an ongoing process that is underpinned by and requiring of respect between researchers and children. Thus, it requires researchers to provide feedback to children on the impact of their involvement in research, from findings to research impact.

The sociology of childhood and children's human rights are key theoretical ways to consider children's participation in research on child maltreatment. At their core, they provide a challenge regarding how research and researchers perceive children and childhood. They invite us to reconsider issues like children's capacity, questions about children's knowledge and concern about their vulnerabilities. The task for researchers, therefore, is to ensure that such concerns are considered critically and not simply used as reasons to limit or even exclude children from research on maltreatment.

Defining and Implementing Children's Participation in Research

The phrase 'children's participation in research' is used across the literature to refer to the varying ways children may be involved in research. It perhaps risks being a somewhat elastic phrase, encompassing children as participants of research, researchers and advisors to research and the other ways that children may influence research agendas and processes. [Montreuil et al. \(2021\)](#) highlighted important distinctions between participatory data collection methods with children and children's broader participation in decisions about research. Participatory methods are the ways in which researchers engage with children to collect data about them, whereas children's broader participation refers to how they are involved in and exert influence over research. This may include but is not limited

to defining research questions for a study, designing its methods and ethical approach, carrying out data collection, engaging in data interpretation and analysis, and making decisions about and leading research dissemination activities.

A rich seam of scholarship conceptualises the implementation of children's participation in policy and practice. Although not all explicitly about research, it provides important and useful considerations for those who wish to advance children's participation in research on child maltreatment.

Hart's (1992) ladder of participation is arguably the best-known model for child participation. Based on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, Hart's model has eight rungs: (a) manipulation; (b) decoration; (c) tokenism; (d) young people assigned but informed; (e) young people consulted and informed; (f) adult-led with shared decisions; (g) youth-led and directed; and (h) youth-led with shared decisions with adults. Shier's (2001) pathways to participation model builds on Hart's work, incorporating an additional dimension to help adults consider how they facilitate or limit children's participation.

These uncover key concerns that remain for researchers and practitioners engaging in research on child maltreatment. They encourage us to explore the status of children and consider how power is distributed between adults and children in the research process. Key questions that arise include: How do we ensure children's participation is a free choice and not a product of adult manipulation? To what extent is children's participation in our research tokenistic? Do children really have influence over the research, or is their involvement a strategic resource for our research? Is it preferable or even possible for power to be shared or handed over to children during the research process? What might be the implications of doing this, especially in areas like child maltreatment? Answers to these questions are not straightforward and may well rely on the particularities of research projects, the contexts in which they take place and the children they seek to involve. Rather, it is the reflexive application of concepts from Hart's and Shier's work – making visible and interrogating the status, power and influence that children have in research (and why) to provide a means for researchers to consider children's participation in their research and how it may be advanced.

Lundy's (2007) model on children's participation identifies four key elements for children's participation in decision-making to be effective and compliant with their participation rights. First is space: Children must be guaranteed a safe space where they can feel free to discuss, share, debate and decide what they want to say and how to say it, and plan their actions. Second is voice: Children and young people must receive the support they need to speak out and express their views. Third is influence: Children's and young people's views must be taken seriously and acted upon. The fourth element is the audience: Children's and young people's views must be communicated to someone who has responsibility to listen and act.

This model not only elucidates the conditions necessary for children to express their views but also underscores the importance of children's involvement in the actions that follow. This is underpinned by a conceptualisation of children as

experts and a key to developing solutions and delivering change. Thus, we see how it challenges ideas about children's capacity and their competence. As with Hart's and Sheir's work, Lundy's model offers a way for researchers to consider the extent to which their research design and practices support children's participation. Does it begin and end with Lundy's element of space through participatory methods? Or does it extend to influence and audience, providing opportunities for research to be transformative for children and support their activism and action in addressing child maltreatment? Such decisions must consider not only the aims of the research but also how participation is experienced by children. Does it feel ethical? Is their participation meaningful or is it tokenistic? (e.g. [Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008](#); [Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014](#)). [Bradbury-Jones et al. \(2018\)](#) argued that although participatory research with all children is complex – practically, methodologically and ethically – it offers a way to address some of the issues that are especially potent for research with vulnerable and marginalised children, like those who have experienced maltreatment. Moreover, participatory research has the potential to find ways to value and bring to the fore the experiences and views of people who otherwise might be excluded from research owing to being constructed as 'too vulnerable' or having needs that are too complex to be accommodated in more 'traditional' research.

The literature discussed here seeks to challenge and upend unequal power relationships – relationships between adults and children and between researchers and research participants. In doing so, it gives insight on how concepts from the sociology of childhood and children's rights may be applied to research on child maltreatment.

Challenges to Children's Participation in Research on Maltreatment

Familiar debates on children's participation more generally may be traced through the children's rights literature and tensions between supporting children's participation and protecting their best interests ([Archard, 2004](#); [Collins, 2017](#); [Marshall, 1997](#); [McMellon & Tisdall, 2020](#)). These tensions are held, in part, by the different conceptualisations of children and childhood.

Broadly speaking, underpinning the ideas of child participation is the view that children are experts, accompanied by the aim of supporting children's involvement and extending their agency and influence. In a research context, this translates not only to engaging children in data collection but also to adult researchers sharing or handing over power regarding the research to children. In contrast, underpinning the ideas of protecting children's best interests is the view that children are vulnerable and incapable, with the accompanying aim of protecting children. In a research context, this may manifest in limiting or excluding children's participation in research to protect them. Although participation in this context is undoubtedly complex, a focus on protectionism, at the expense of participation, risks denying the most marginalised children the effects of

empowerment and achieving positive change at an individual and collective level. It is tempting, therefore, to choose one over the other – to prioritise research for individual agency over responsibility for safety.

Such opposing conceptualisations of children, as vulnerable or agentic, risk decoupling one from the other, when in fact it is the relationship between them that is important. The right to participate in research about maltreatment should be understood in relation to the right to be protected from harm. This means that in research with children, including research on child maltreatment, researchers need to make space for and attend to ideas of children's agency and vulnerabilities. In other words, research should recognise and support children's expertise and agency and work in ways to further protect and maximise children's best interests. By holding these conceptualisations of children in tension, the practical, methodological and ethical necessities and complexities of children's participation in research on child maltreatment emerge. Children's right to protection is deeply entwined in implementing children's right to participate in research on child maltreatment.

However, in research, protective rights might be used to exclude children from research. For example, they could be used to position children as being 'too vulnerable' to participate in research, leading to the restriction or circumvention of their participation rights (see [Archard, 2004](#); [Hill & Tisdall, 1997](#); [James et al., 1998](#); [Wyness, 2012](#)). Such paternalistic responses are put forward as protective measures that limit opportunities for adult pressure and manipulation of vulnerable children in research and a means to limit any allied distress. This could prevent children from sharing their experiences and needs and limit their opportunity to influence policy and practice. Fundamentally, it risks producing an epistemic injustice ([Fricker, 2007](#)) that ignores children's accounts of their lives. It is a harm in its own right that further risks excluding children from policy and practice decisions that affect their lives (see [Morrison et al., 2020](#)).

This brings us back to the tension that lies in protecting a child's best interests and recognising a child's participation rights. The [United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child \(2009, 2013\)](#) has wrestled with articulations between a child's best interests and participation rights, with the goal of ensuring neither are subsumed. Children's participation rights should be recognised on their own and in conjunction with children's welfare. Indeed, these rights are complementary and interrelated. Protective rights can be used to galvanise action on implementing children's participation rights in research on maltreatment. Similarly, children's participation rights offer a way to uphold their protective rights. In attending to both children's protective and participative rights, new ways to involve children in research on child maltreatment can emerge – ones that are emancipatory and empowering and that prioritise and advance the interests of children.

A Way Forward? Adopting a Rights Approach to Children's Participation in Research on Child Maltreatment

Returning to the [UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's \(2009\)](#) general comment on Article 12, we find a useful and expansive interpretation of how to implement children's participation rights. This approach seeks to maximise the potential for children's participation, including children with difficult experiences like child maltreatment. Through it, we can begin to see that in adopting a children's rights lens, the question becomes not if children should participate but rather how their participation may be best facilitated. Its interpretations and ensuing implications for research are summarised in [Table 1.1](#). This offers a way for researchers to adopt a rights approach to children's participation in research on maltreatment, attending to both children's protective and participative rights.

Table 1.1. Using a Rights Lens to Implement Children's Participation in Research.

Questions About Children's Participation and Research	Provisions Made by the CRC General Comment on Article 12	Ensuing Implications for Implementing Children's Participation Rights in Research
Do children have the capacity to participate in research?	A child should be presumed to have the capacity to form their own view: 'It is not up to the child to first prove his or her capacity' (para. 20).	Children should be presumed capable to form views and capable of participation in research – the onus is on researchers to design research that supports children's participation.
What weight should children's views have in and about research?	'Being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' requires views to be considered seriously (para. 28).	Children's views should be given weight and taken seriously. The weight given to children's views will depend on their age and maturity.
At what age can children participate?	There is no age limit on the right of the child to express their views (para. 21).	Age should not be a determinative factor in decisions about children's participation in research.

Table 1.1. (Continued)

Questions About Children's Participation and Research	Provisions Made by the CRC General Comment on Article 12	Ensuing Implications for Implementing Children's Participation Rights in Research
Do children know enough to be able to participate?	A child need not have comprehensive knowledge to be considered capable (para. 21).	Children's knowledge (complete or otherwise) should not be a barrier to their participation in research.
Are some children too vulnerable to participate?	Children experiencing difficulties must have opportunities to express their views (para. 21). State parties must be aware of the 'potential negative consequences of an inconsiderate practice of this right' and ensure the 'full protection of the child' (para. 21). A child should not be 'interviewed more often than necessary, in particular when harmful events are explored' (para. 24).	Children with experience of maltreatment should have the opportunity to participate in research about maltreatment. Children's participation must be carefully thought through. Participation should not have adverse consequences for children. Care and attention are required when researching maltreatment with children. Participation should not involve the repeated exploration of harmful events.
What do children need to be able to consent to participation?	Information is a precondition to a child's 'clarified decisions', both in terms of (a) the matters, options, and possible decision to be taken and their consequences and (b) the conditions under which the child will be asked to express their views (para. 25).	Researchers need to give children information about participation before children can consent to participate.

Table 1.1. (*Continued*)

Questions About Children's Participation and Research	Provisions Made by the CRC General Comment on Article 12	Ensuing Implications for Implementing Children's Participation Rights in Research
What happens after the research ends?	Feedback should be provided to the child on the outcome and how the child's views were considered (para. 45).	Researchers are responsible for reporting to children about the outcome of the research and how children's views were considered.

Conclusion

Children's right to participate in research that is about them is not necessarily at odds with their right to be protected from harm, even when that research is about the maltreatment of children. The sociology of childhood offers useful theoretical resources to provide a rationale for children's participation in research on child maltreatment, including children's rights, children's participation rights and important considerations for meeting these rights. Through discussion of these resources, the chapter has explored the importance and relevance of these concepts for research on child maltreatment, setting out some key dilemmas and challenges that emerge when conducting research with children and implementing their participation rights in this context. Subsequent chapters take up these dilemmas and challenges through various theoretical and methodological approaches and innovative solutions.

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