Using SenseMaker® in Child-Centered Research
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This paper highlights results from a study Fierro Consulting conducted in Afar, in Northern Ethiopia and some specificities of Child-Centered Research. It identifies: 1) ways that SenseMaker® was used to help research be more Child-Centered and 2) the complexity of conducting Child-Centered research in Ethiopia. Suggestions are made to plan Child-Centered research in Ethiopia in the future in a way that is also gender responsive and culturally appropriate.

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Child-Centered Research

Child-Centered research has risen in the field of social research in response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child held in 1989 and critical research perspectives. Critical research perspectives take into account the ways in which power dynamics among groups of people of different social status affect the relationship between researchers and their respondents. Race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation impact the research process when researcher and respondents have a different positioning in relating to any of those variables or a combination of them. When researchers are not aware of how their social status and social positioning are perceived by their respondents, the research process can perpetuate the very structures of our society that it may aim at changing. The issues at play are more complex than how the researcher is perceived by the respondent; social status and position shapes the way the researcher molds his or her outlook upon the world. Smith (1999) as a Maori native of New Zealand, noticed how "concepts of self and other, conceptions of time, rubrics of classification, and social organization could all be distorted if seen through non-native eyes (42)." Also, researchers like Mertens (2009) highlight how most research that ignores the researcher's positionality generally works from a *deficit perspective*, where the respondent is seen as "less than" the researcher's normative reference point. A similar point can be made for research conducted with children, if the adults involved don't critically engage their viewpoints and judgments. This lens challenges researchers to sharpen our self-reflective practices in how we approach planning, gathering, and analyzing information *with* children (as opposed to *for* children). Until recently, developmental psychology dominated the field of research with children who were seen as "adults in training", rather than as interactive agents that embody complexity in how they process and interact with their surroundings. Child-Centered methodology values the context the child is interacting with and uses creativity to engage children in a variety of verbal, visual, and non-verbal ways: "In a child-centered study, the goal is to empower young voices to speak and be heard, avoiding adult encumbrance or domination."(Clark, 2010, 19) This can only occur among researchers who collect vast information on context and who are experienced in mitigating power dynamics in the relationships they establish with children by taking on a "friend-like status"(although an older friend) and avoiding interfering and intervening in the way adults usually would (Clark, 2010, 51).

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Child-Centered Methodology

Child-Centered methodologies can vary across different researchers and different studies, but overall they promote a critical and reflective process of *how* the researcher engages children, and whether he or she is engaging from a place of curiosity or power. Child-Centered methodology cannot eliminate the dominant role of researchers as adults with children but tries to limit those dynamics by: 1) Engaging children in planning decisions; 2) Establishing relationships with child respondents of trusting curiosity; 3) Avoiding playing roles of disciplinarians and knowledge-bearers; 4) Limiting assumptions about how children see the world; 5) Investigating the context from a child's perspective; and 6) Establishing complicity with children. Child-Centered approaches help children's voices emerge as a more genuine representation of their view of their own world. Without these extra steps, research can easily become a way for children to fulfill or react to the expectations of researchers whom they perceive to be identical to the wider adult world.

Child-Centered Methods

The following is not an exhaustive overview of Child-Centered methods of research. Here are a few examples of how traditional methods can be adapted to be more Child-Centered and to limit the power gap between the child respondent and the adult researchers.

Observations

Observations are valuable for researchers to understand the context from the child's perspective by witnessing how the child interacts in the context itself. Through observation, the researcher can notice: the formality or informality of the language practiced among insiders, the relationships among children and between children and adults within this context, and how the child behaves in a naturalistic setting: "More malleable than a questionnaire, [in an observation] the researcher essentially acts as the instrument of research, by flexibly interacting with the children and others (Clark, 2010, 45)." It is vital that the researcher not discipline the child but create an atmosphere of complicity by being curious about the child's perceptions. "To achieve such friend-like status, fieldworkers generally react to children without interfering or intervening, as adults usually might do (Clark, 2010, 45)." Mandell calls this the "least-adult" stance (1988). Done well, observations are a way for researchers to enter a child's view of the world and abandon prior assumptions about childhood in that context. It is recommended that inexperienced researchers start with observing young adults before proceeding to younger children (Clark, 2010).

Helpful Quotes to Share Power with Children and Break Usual Norms

"Kids often know more than adults do about things…."

"Interrupt me at any time if you remember something I should know…."

"Tell me right away if you think I'm getting the wrong idea about something…."

"That helps me understand, thanks!"

Put onus on yourself: *"My ears are slow today, can you maybe say that again and maybe a little louder?"*

"I'm not sure I understand…(they live on the moon)?"

Interviews

Interviews with children are grounded in the relationship that the interviewer establishes with the child. Responsiveness to each child's preferences in terms of learning style and tempo can help the researcher receive the best information from very different children. The use of drawing, photos, visuals, and/or props can aid this process. Used in a Child-Centered process, the researcher would at best, interact with children either in the creation of the visual or in its interpretation or understanding. One-on-one interviews are best suited to explore sensitive topics and uncover deep psychological processes guaranteeing confidentiality. The researcher can familiarize herself/himself beforehand to help the process. The advantage of an interview is that the researcher can adapt to each child quite easily. It is also recommended to start and end the interview with an easy task. Once the conversation starts however, the researcher's status may weigh heavier in the absence of other children, reminding the child of a contest or an exam setting, where s/he is being disciplined (Clark, 2010; Barker, 2003; Brian, 2006).

Focus Groups

Focus groups are most suitable when the content studied relates to how people perceive issues as a group and when the presence of other children can help the researcher dig deeper into a topic. Focus groups with children are especially appropriate to: 1) observe group dynamics in relations to a topic (like stigma or bullying); 2) to explore the relationship between different concepts; and 3) to explore the behavior of children, since the nature of their lives makes most decisions occur publicly. For instance, if one were interested in children's consumer behavior, focus groups would be appropriate because similar performative dynamics would take place in the room than exist when they make choices in a store in their friends' presence or thinking of them. Just as for interviews, focus groups with children can incorporate drawing, props, and other visual aids. Clark notices that the more experienced the researcher, the more likely the children can stay focused for longer periods of time without boredom. Creativity and improvisation are also essential characteristics for facilitating focus groups with children.

For American children, Clark suggests homogenous groups in terms of: age (at most 2 years apart), gender (girls are more collaborative in conversations than boys), exposure to the topic of discussion (for instance habitual consumers separate from one-time users). According to Clark, focus group discussions should preferably not engage children who are already from the same group of friends because they carry rigid, established hierarchies and power dynamics into the discussion that are unknown to the researcher. The focus group should start by setting the tone in a way that explains that this is a different context than what the children are accustomed to and where they are encouraged to know more than the adult, interrupt the adult, correct the adult, use visuals when someone's talking, and say things even if they may seem dumb (Clark, 2010).

What we did

The following sections review the main ways in which recent research with girls in Afar utilized Child-Centered components to improve the quality of data collected.

SenseMaker® as a tool

In our complex world, stories are a valuable asset because they help us see a person's life from a variety of angles at the same time. From this understanding, SenseMaker® was created as both methodology and a software package. The methodology combines qualitative (narrative) and quantitative (statistical) methods. In brief, it entails a person telling a story and then engaging in conversation to help the researcher understand the story. SenseMaker® is groundbreaking in that the respondents have more power over how their stories are interpreted. It is also a software product that helps analyze the narratives in conjunction with questions about the story to identify patterns in the dataset. Because the stories are quite short *(micronarratives),* SenseMaker® enables data collections that carry the statistical strength of vast samples and the texture and feel of qualitative research for the same sample.

SenseMaker® was used extensively to help elevate the voices of girls in knowledge production about their own lives. By using storytelling, SenseMaker® allows the researcher to establish an informal relationship with girls who identify a story of their choice that they feel is important to share with others.
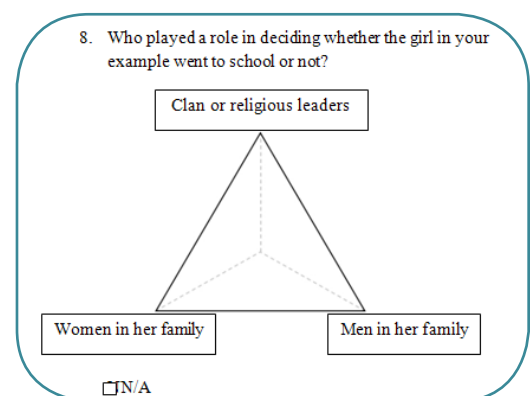
A sample of 100 girls and their respective caregivers (mainly mothers, but often other women their family or community) were asked to share a story about a girl and how going or not going to school change her life or those around her.

To help interpret the stories respondents were asked questions like: *How did this example make you feel? What is your example about? (*Followed by a list of themes) and *Who played a role in deciding whether the girl in your story went to school or not?* The last question was formulated as a triad: a response choice that allows someone to respond how three factors contribute to the answer by placing a dot anywhere within or on the borders of a triangle or choosing not applicable. The respondent is instructed to place a dot closest to the concept that is strongest.

The image to the right shows this triad.

The study integrated Child-Centered components in the following ways:

- *Developing the research instrument:* The research instrument was created by identifying primary concerns of girls, their caregivers, and heads of household. Over the course of three pretest days in the field, different prompts were tested to assess which one was most appropriate in soliciting girls' experiences.

- Testing different contexts: Also over the three pretest days, the instrument was administered with girls of different ages within a variety of contexts (at home, in school, and in an open field

8. Who played a role in deciding whether the girl in your example went to school or not?

Clan or religious leaders

Women in her family   Men in her family

☐ N/A

in the village, in groups and as individuals) and to choose the best context and support both openness and confidentiality. Focus groups were not conducted thereafter both because girls rarely opened up in a group setting, and with both adults and children, the tendency was for the whole group to agree. This confirmed Getachew's findings that even in presence of variations in Afar cultures and traditions, in relating to foreigners Afaris tend to coalesce in name of their shared identity and religion (Getachew, 2001).

- Allowing the child to tell someone else's story: Researchers made the decision to allow respondents to tell someone else's story so they could choose to: 1) Tell their own story, 2) Tell someone else's story, 3) Tell their own story as if it were someone else's. The latter option was not mentioned explicitly but was an option that children could have chosen, allowing them to be more reserved if needed.

- Translating for different contexts and for child-appropriate speech: When translating the research instrument from Amharic to Afari, alternate translations were included in parentheses when different researchers noticed variations in local lexicon. Further, language was rendered accessible for girls age 10 and over.

- Collecting child's consent: In addition to obtaining consent from caregivers to interview girls, girls were also asked for consent to safeguard their freedom to decline the interview. Further, girls were offered several degrees of confidential options:

    - To not have their story featured in reports and promotional materials,

    - To not be audiorecorded,

    - To decline participation in the study altogether.

- *Accountability:* In half of the villages, two girl respondents were interviewed to ask whether the data collection process was accessible, if the questions were clear, and what could be changed in wording or in how the instrument was administered in order to improve data collection for girls. The overwhelming majority of responses were positive, with girls saying that the process worked well as long as the researcher was patient with them and willing to explain instructions more than once. Girls also confirmed our opinions that the research instrument was easier for literate respondents.

- For triad responses (see triangle image above) researchers used visual and kinesthetic aids. For complex questions like triads, researcher used examples and sometimes drew the triangle on the ground asking respondents to place a rock in the right place to indicate their answer. Once they placed a point, they were asked to explain it back to the researcher to ensure they had understood the range of response choices at their disposal.

Cultural Appropriateness – Afar context

"The Afar livelihood is highly adapted to manage risk and social exchange mechanisms are integral to this adaptation (Davies and Bennett, 2007, 508)."

One of the key components of the study was to assess and define what marginalization meant for the Afari communities. Studies have shown that policy-wise, there is a bias in addressing pastoralist societies as strictly poor. Where these assumptions dominate, one fails to address wealth distribution and systems of resilience within the society. The vulnerability of pastoralist societies does not always center around poverty, often government policies and land distribution are important factors which then affect the access to water, local conflict among clans, and access to education. Davies and Bennett (2007) highlight how the Afar, while vulnerable, have also incorporated systems of resilience into their traditional culture. The intentional cultivation of social capital or 'bonding' is one of these mechanisms. In other words the tightly interwoven Afar family structure is one where families help other families, especially their Absuma families. Absuma marriages are arranged marriages between cousins, often taking place during puberty. These marriages are generally seen as an obstacle to education because most girls have to prioritize the

needs of her family once they are married, leading them to drop out of school. The tight Absuma family ties, however, have helped the Afar create a solid and resilient community system where 'bonding' helps protect a household through disease, drought, and famine by:1) having families receive *'iriba',* a donation-like insurance that is given by an Absuma relative in case of drought or disaster and 2) increasing the chances of combining family wealth across families instead of splitting it after marriage.

While child-centered data collection methods are appropriate in ethical terms towards the child, it is also important to place due attention to the cultural context and to remember that the rights of the child are supposed guaranteed within the context of a community that is still struggling with basic survival needs. Hence, solutions should not be provided in a vacuum but must be strongly connected to other vital systems of family ties and household priorities.

Further, although the team brought photo equipment to use visuals, we were advised against it by many experienced professionals who work in Afar and realized that images of locations were not welcome in the local culture.

Suggestions for future Child-Centered research

Based on the experience from the last few years of research with children in different Ethiopian contexts, some recommendations are made to enhance the quality of Child-Centered Research going forward.

Training for Child-Centered Research

Train researchers, data collectors, and translators on aspects of Child-Centered methodology so they understand the theoretical foundation of the study and are capable of alerting senior researchers to new challenges in the field. This includes training researchers on the limitations of strictly developmental approaches to research with children and role-playing ways that adults can step down from their role of authority and take on a 'least adult' role instead. If possible, invite children to a portion of the training to help them engage in a consultant role from the beginning and help identify ways to help the research process feel more playful.

Gender and cultural-responsiveness

Deliver a workshop with researchers on how gender roles and cultural context interact with age within that specific cultural context. Encourage role-playing to identify possible scenarios and solutions that are consistent with Child-Centeredness, gender-responsiveness, and cultural specificity principles.

Pre-testing for Child-Centeredness

Based on the literature on Child-Centered research, context plays an indispensable role. The extensive differences I've experienced between two adjacent regions in Ethiopia indicate that the specificity of each cultural context is never to be taken for granted even when distances are not huge. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that one week be devoted to studying the child's life and outlook in the field and testing the research instruments within that context with the following process:

- The first day, each researcher would be invited to shadow a child in their everyday routine. At the end of the day, they would engage in a meaning-making discussion by asking questions about the day as it relates to aspects of the study.

- On the second day, researchers can create a draft of the research instruments in a collaborative work session with: children, adults, and multiple key stakeholders in the process.

- On the mornings of the third and fourth days, the instruments can be tested first with young adults and then with younger children. After data collection, the children can be interviewed individually by adults and/or

other children to reflect on the data collection process and the clarity of the questions. In the afternoon and evening, key children informants and researchers can debrief on the feedback received to: 1) identify what are the boundaries of Child-Centeredness in this specific context, 2) revise the research instrument, and 3) identify which gender is most appropriate for researchers.

- On day 5, the revised instrument can be tested in the morning followed by a focus group with respondents. In the afternoon the team can meet to finalize changes and set criteria for the larger data collection. Further, the group can create a child interview protocol to be implemented with at least one child per village throughout the data collection to identify possible changes in context as they relate to the research instrument.

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