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Book review:

Researching children's experiences by Melissa Freeman and
Sandra Mathison. The Guilford Press, New York 2009

I came across "Researching children's experiences" by Melissa Freeman and Sandra Mathison while I was participating in the research project devoted to the situation of children growing up in pockets of poverty in Poland⁵⁶, thus I began to study this book with a considerable level of curiosity and I must admit that I was not disappointed with this reading. The intention of the authors (two US researchers dealing with the analysis of educational systems and processes) indicated in the very first sentence of the preface was: "to describe and show how researchers can do research with children and youth from a social constructivist methodological perspective" (p. vi) and it seems to me that Freeman and Mathison managed to reach this aim quite successfully. Although the authors strongly underline their epistemological and methodological standpoint, a lot of their remarks have the general meaning going beyond the social constructivist perspective.

The book contains 10 chapters. The opening chapter "Conceptions of children and childhood" is of rather theoretical nature and - regarding the subject of discussion - stands out from the next chapters of the volume, thus I will focus on some details of it. This chapter treats about dominant theoretical perspectives on childhood and children as a social category and their influence on research with children. Following the quotation from Frønes – "there is not one childhood, but many, formed at the intersection of different, cultural, social and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments" (p. 1) - the authors shortly describe how the concepts of the child and children have changed historically and culturally. Freeman and Mathison focused mostly on the 20th century theories rather unjustly avoiding the broader description of earlier historical concepts of childhood in European societies (considered for example by Philippe Ariès [1995] who pointed that the childhood was not always perceived as a separate phase of life cycle and it is itself the historical outgrowth). Yet, the modern perspectives on childhood are thoroughly described in the text. The attention of the readers from the countries in which children's rights are continuously broken should be drawn to "the principles of

⁵⁶Project "WZLOT- Strengthening opportunities and weakening transmission of poverty among city inhabitants of the Lodz province", financed by the Operational Program Human Capital within the framework of the European Social Fund. The aim of the project was to get better understanding of the process of intergenerational transmission of poverty in the urban enclaves of poverty. 13-14 year old children were interviewed with questionnaires and in-depth interviews within the framework of this project (see www.wzlot.uni.lodz.pl).

the new studies of childhood” prepared within the interdisciplinary research movement by sociologists, social anthropologists, developmental psychologists, social geographers, education researchers and social work researchers. “The unique qualities of childhood as a developmental phase, child’s autonomy and children’s rights to ‘voice opinions and influence decisions in matters relating their own lives” (Brooker as quoted in Freeman & Mathison, p. 7) are strongly underlined in this set of principles. The final parts of the chapter deal with the concept of experience and the epistemological perspective of the authors – the different notions of constructivism and constructionist approach in social research. Freeman and Mathison declare that they take “a social constructivist approach to researching children’s lived experience to emphasize the lived experiences of children and the constructed nature of research” (p. 14). In my opinion, this chapter has two disadvantages. The first one – namely the superficial treatment of early historical ways of conceptualizing children and childhood was mentioned above. The second fault is that the authors keep on repeating that they follow the social constructivist perspective in the introductory parts of the chapter, which can really annoy the reader.

The following chapters are “practice-oriented”, they describe step by step the entire process of research with children – negotiating the access for research with children (chapter 2); recruiting child participants (chapter 3); defining the researcher roles (chapter 4); different methods of researching children’s experiences from interviewing, through art and photography to journaling; written responses and the possibilities created by new technologies (chapters 6-8) and analyzing data (chapter 10). In these chapters the authors show us advantages and disadvantages of numerous research strategies and techniques providing very practical and helpful examples based not only on their own research experiences, but also on the research projects conducted by other authors in different cultural settings. The quantity and variety of the descriptions of the very practical methodological solutions is the unquestionable advantage of the book. Freeman and Mathison make us aware of the questions which we are to face while designing and conducting a research project, give us many clues helpful in the research design – we may learn how to identify children as research participants, how to negotiate access and develop relationship with them, what kind of procedures can be adapted in contacts with “gatekeepers” – individuals legally responsible for children like parents or teachers or even how to construct the recruitment flyer. They do not escape from describing the studies of very complicated nature like children with HIV narratives collected by Blumenreich (p. 29). The separate part of the book (chapter 5) is devoted to the ethical issues in the research with children and youth (for example, the important issue of influence of different types of researcher’s role fulfillment on relationships with child participants), but the considerations on ethics are inbuilt also in other chapters.

The last chapter treats about children as researchers. The discussion about the problem of establishing the real partnership with children and young people is really interesting – once more the authors formulate the question which is not only methodological but also directs us toward the considerations of rather philosophical nature regarding the children’s status in modern Euro-American societies. Also in chapters 3 and 4 Freeman and Mathison present how the assumptions on the human nature can influence a research project – this notion is important for all scientists in all research situations.

What I especially appreciate is the Freeman and Mathison’s respectful attitude towards children and young people as subjects, which is evident throughout the entire book. They underline that a researcher has to thoroughly assess complexity of the situation of children participating in the scientific research. The authors

concentrated on the issue of voluntary participation – a child needs to understand that taking part in the project is the matter of free will not obligation. They draw our attention - also in a symbolic sense – to the important values such as reciprocity in the relationship between researcher and participant: “the reciprocity can also mean giving something back to the community”(p. 83), contributing “to the well-being beyond children and youth beyond those in a particular research study”.

When we consider the recent great interest in the area of sociology of childhood and children⁵⁷ we can state that we really need such books like “Researching children’s experiences”. This area of sociological and social research is not yet entirely recognized in all its aspects and the danger of harm for participants is probably more serious than in the research projects with adults attendance.

“Researching children’s experiences” is constructed in the “handbook style” – at the end of every chapter we can find “discussion questions” – sets of questions and practical tasks for readers. Thus following probably the authors’ intention, I would primarily recommend this book for social sciences students and for researchers who are on the beginning of their academic career, but I have to admit that also experienced scholars will find this work valuable and worth reading.

References

Ariès, Philippe (1995) *Centuries of childhood: a social history of family life*. [L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime]. Gdańsk. Marabut Publishing House.

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⁵⁷ In the abstract book of 9th Conference of European Sociological Association we will find 92 abstracts accepted for the sessions of Research Network 04 “Sociology of Children and Childhood” (9th Conference of European Sociological Association, ESA 2009, European Society or European Societies, 02-05 September 2009, Lisbon, CD).