

*Advances in Nursing Science*  
Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 102-113  
© 2003 Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Inc.

# Getting Critical With Children Empowering Approaches With a Disempowered Group

*Helene Berman, RN, PhD*

The study of children and childhood has historically been accorded a marginal place in the health, human, and social sciences. In part, this is due to prevailing Western ideology that constructs children as passive, presocial, innocent, and vulnerable. The dominant discourse is further characterized by the treatment of children as a homogeneous group, devoid of race, class, or gender. While many investigators have described strategies for the conduct of research that is situated in the interpretive paradigm, there has been no comparable articulation of ideas regarding the conduct of critically grounded research when our participants are children. The purpose of this article is to put forth a historical and contextual analysis of childhood, including a discussion of evolving perspectives about childhood. The manner by which changing social, political, and environmental landscapes have contributed to the marginalization and disenfranchisement of children is examined. Finally, strategies for conducting nursing research that is grounded in the critical paradigmatic perspective, with the simultaneous aims of action, change, and empowerment, are proposed. **Key words:** *childhood, children, Critical paradigm, empowerment, gender, marginalization*

*Meyebela: My Bengali Girlhood—A Memoir of Growing Up Female in a Muslim World*, was written following Taslima Nasrin's escape to Europe after months of hiding. Nasrin tells the often harrowing story of her journey from birth to adolescence. It was necessary for her to create new language to denote this passage, as none existed in her native tongue. The Bengali term for childhood is *chelebela*: boy-time.

*Meyebela*, an act of radical linguistics, means girl-time.

Globe and Mail, Book Review  
Section, p. D12  
October 5, 2002

The study of children and childhood has always been accorded a marginal place in the health, human, and social sciences. In part, this reality may be attributed to prevailing Western ideology that constructs children as presocial, passive, and dependent beings, as members of a private, domestic sphere that is beyond the realm of social or cultural analysis. The dominant view of children further depicts childhood as a temporary state, with efforts directed solely to the termination of this state, to growing up and becoming adults. Through the familiar processes of childhood socialization, the primary task for children throughout all stages of development is one of incrementally learning about "adult ways of being" and strategies for assuming their proper place in the world of adults. In

---

*From the School of Nursing, University of Western Ontario and the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, London, Ontario, Canada.*

*Ideas for this paper are derived from research that I have been conducting with many colleagues over the past 7 years, funded by Status of Women Canada, the Canadian Nurses' Foundation, and the Ontario Ministry of Health, as well as from the children with whom I live and work.*

*Corresponding author: Helene Berman, RN, PhD, School of Nursing, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C1 (e-mail: bberman@uwo.ca).*

essence, children are considered to be of only marginal interest because they are learners, rather than creators, of culture.<sup>1</sup>

A central aspect of this marginalization is the tendency to examine the concept of childhood as a single entity in history, devoid of race, class, or gender. In North America, the popular discourse has largely obscured differences between girls and boys by collapsing these groups of young people under the more generic rubric of "children and youth."<sup>2</sup> The net result is to effectively conceal the reality of gender-based oppression, discrimination, and inequality as these are experienced by this population.

Despite substantial gains made throughout the past 2 decades, gender inequality continues to be a defining feature of Western culture. A considerable body of feminist research has been devoted to documenting this inequality as it manifests itself in the economy, the family, the health arena, politics, law, and in most other aspects of social and cultural life. While a significant amount of attention has been, and continues to be, paid to the status of women in society, interest in the lives of girls and boys, and the way in which gender shapes and limits their worlds, has been minimal. The unstated presumption is that gender inequality is a phenomenon that does not emerge until adulthood, as if adult females experience gender discrimination or other forms of gender-based violence, but girls do not.<sup>3</sup> Clearly this is not the case.

Childhood and adolescence are periods in the life cycle during which gender roles and gender inequality are central. In fact, childhood and adolescence are both critical and formative periods in which gender socialization is intensely inscribed in the psychosexual development that characterizes these developmental phases. As Randall and Haskell stated, "childhood and adolescence are periods in which girls learn profound lessons about what it means to be female in a sexist society."<sup>3(p1)</sup>

For feminist and critical writers and scholars who are interested in delving into the worlds of girls and boys, the prevailing gendered and decontextualized construction

of children and childhood is highly problematic. The vast majority of feminist writings pertain to the lives of adult women, and children have been largely overlooked. Articles in this journal<sup>4-6</sup> and elsewhere<sup>7,8</sup> have explicitly maintained that feminist research is that which is conducted by and for women. The degree to which this description extends to the lives of girls is not clear. Many of the prescriptions for the conduct of feminist research call for collaboration, dialogue, and partnerships, all of which are quite appropriate and feasible when our research participants are adult women. However, when our participants are children, girls, and/or boys, the approaches as currently articulated may have little relevance, or at best, require considerable modification to be of use.

The purposes of this article are to put forth a historical and contextual analysis of childhood, including a discussion of changing perspectives about childhood and the relative contributions of industrialization, capitalism, and globalization to the marginalization and disenfranchisement of children; to propose strategies for conducting critically grounded nursing research with children; and to critique prevailing approaches. In the process, the myth of childhood innocence and its role in the perpetuation of unequal power relations between children and adults will be considered. Throughout the article, a view of children as victims is rejected in favor of a view that respects their social and political agency. Using examples from research related to violence in the lives of girls and boys,<sup>9-11</sup> I will examine what it means to use empowering research approaches with children, a most disempowered group. It is hoped that the ideas set forth will contribute to the formation of a critical and feminist research agenda when our participants are children.

#### **THE WORLDS OF CHILDREN IN A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Childhood has often been described as a social construction that varies across cultural and historical contexts. In what is commonly

regarded as the most influential writing on the topic, Aries wrote in *Centuries of Childhood* that childhood, as it is understood in contemporary Western society, did not exist prior to the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> Drawing largely on evidence from French sources, Aries' central thesis was that, until this time, childhood was no more than a stage to be passed through, and children were essentially treated as miniature adults. Aries further asserted that although some medieval parents cared for and about their children, many were indifferent to their offspring.

In support of his claims regarding the nonexistence of childhood at the beginning of the 17th century, Aries recounts the classic story of Louis XIII. Very briefly, the story is of a young Louis XIII, not yet 1 year of age, whose nanny "waggled his cock with her fingers."<sup>13(p41)</sup> As told in the diary of Henry IV's physician, young Louis devoted a considerable portion of his early years to the entertainment and amusement of the King and Queen, along with other members of the Court, sharing with all "the pleasures of his first erections." When Louis XIII was about 5 years old, jokes about his own sexual parts subsided and were replaced by jokes about the sexual parts and practices of others, including his nanny, servants, and chambermaids.

In contrast to modern proscriptions that require all references to sexual matters to be strictly avoided in the company of children, Aries<sup>13</sup> maintained that associating children with the sexual ribaldries of adults was an acceptable practice in the 17th century. Further, such activities were not confined to members of the nobility, but were equally rampant among "commoners". While these behaviors today are deemed punishable offenses, this was not the case in the beginning of the 17th century. And even today, it would be misleading to suggest that the sexual abuse of children is not tolerated. Although there are laws against such behavior, child sexual abuse cases are difficult to prove in court, children are often considered unreliable witnesses and are not believed when they come forward with their stories, and the entire pro-

cess is one that further demeans and revictimizes children. When we consider the disturbing fact that women's prisons today are filled with victims of childhood sexual abuse, while no comparable number of pedophiles occupy the cells of male prisons, the "then and now" dichotomous notion that child sexual exploitation is a "thing of the past" simply falls apart. The reality is that the sexual exploitation and abuse of children continues to be tolerated, with large numbers of child molesters remaining unpunished and undiscovered.

Support for Aries' contention that childhood is a relatively recent phenomenon has been articulated by a number of contemporary scholars. Basing his remarks on the same information used by Aries, Hunt<sup>14</sup> insisted that if conditions were so appalling for Louis XIII, then surely the lives of "common" children must be worse. DeMause<sup>15</sup> presented an even bleaker depiction of parenting, suggesting that the history of childhood is tantamount to the history of child abuse. According to DeMause, the cultural and moral imperative for families in Western society to ensure a loving and nurturing environment for their children is a relatively new phenomenon.

During the past few years, many have challenged the idea that childhood did not exist in medieval times and that it is a contemporary creation. In Pollock's *Forgotten Children*,<sup>16</sup> an examination of diaries from 1500-1900 reveals ample evidence that parents from virtually every century cared for and nurtured their children in some manner, recognized distinct stages of development, utilized a wide assortment of disciplinary, nonabusive child-rearing techniques, and worried about their children's well-being. Pollock concludes that, in a most fundamental sense, the essence of parenting has not changed a great deal from the 16th to the 19th century apart from social changes and technological improvements.

Whether parents in medieval society were, or were not, as heartless and indifferent to their children as Aries suggests, the widely accepted scenario is what Calvert<sup>17</sup> calls a "presentist" point of view. In its most

simplistic sense, this perspective suggests that parents of yesterday were bad, while those of today are good. Clearly such a conclusion is inadequate. No single century has exclusive claim on good or bad parenting. The more germane issue is not whether parents did or did not love their children, but how they treated the children they loved and how the concept of childhood has transformed as a result of changing social, cultural, and political contexts. According to Calvert, this transformation is marked by 3 distinct shifts between 1600 and 1900, all of which contain positive and negative features. In the first phase, children led precarious lives punctuated by harsh conditions of frontier life, high rates of infant mortality, illnesses, and accidents. Within this culture, childhood was a hazardous time, "essentially a state of illness" and physical vulnerability, and the goal was one of survival. There was no nostalgia about childhood as a cherished phase of life; the emphasis was on early acceptance of adult responsibilities and self-sufficiency.

The decades around the turn of the 18th century were characterized by "a growing confidence in the rationality of nature."<sup>17(p78)</sup> Where parents had previously sought to protect their children from natural threats and illness, the new paradigm insisted that children would fare better with little parental intervention. No longer a time of inevitable and prolonged illness and vulnerability, childhood was now viewed as a time of robust health. Parents did not love their children more than in previous eras, but found more to appreciate in their children. As Calvert said, "childhood had its good points."<sup>17(p78)</sup> The duration of childhood increased, and instead of wishing it were over quickly, childhood became a valued part of human development.

During Calvert's third phase, parents did not simply take pleasure in childhood, but sought to prolong and shelter it as a special period of innocence from the adult world. Childhood became imbued with an almost sacred character. According to Calvert, the 19th century was marked by an almost ob-

session with the concept of loss. Mourning pictures, tragic love stories, and the gradual decline of the human species were common images. The notion of childhood became a romanticized ideal. Children were now pure and innocent, and parents' primary responsibility was to protect them from the evils of the adult world, largely accomplished by isolating them as much as possible from that world. According to Jenkins,<sup>18</sup> this myth of innocence, which persists today, has contributed to the breakdown of traditional forms of family and community.

### **The innocent child and other modern myths**

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child contains a set of moral assumptions about what is good or bad for a child. As conceptualized within this document, childhood is a time of innocence. Central to this ideal construction is the view that power and violence have no place in the worlds of children. Consistent with the image of innocence, childhood is construed as a whimsical, happy, and carefree time of life; children are not supposed to witness violence, and are certainly not supposed to engage in it. The reality is that many children throughout the world are not happy, and that multiple forms of violence are woven into the fabric of everyday life for millions of young people, girls and boys alike. The widespread trafficking and sexual exploitation of children in Thailand and the Philippines; the bondage of young laborers in India; the disappearance of children in Argentina; the victim of honor killings in the Middle East are all well-documented. Media attention has typically emphasized horrific events around the world, leading one to believe that atrocities inflicted upon children occur elsewhere. Existing statistics on physical, sexual, and emotional abuse reveal otherwise and clearly demonstrate that large numbers of children in North America encounter violence routinely.

Underlying the tenets of the United Nations Convention is a conceptualization of children

as passive creatures upon whom society impacts in some form. Coles, who sought to understand how children make sense out of important events in their lives in *The Political Life of Children*,<sup>19</sup> has suggested that this view of children as "passive" is flawed and misleading. According to Coles, children are eager to understand the political events that influence their lives. He rejects the widespread notion that children passively echo ideas and beliefs that are passed on to them by their parents and other adults whom they encounter. Instead, Coles insists that children strive to understand the political, social, and cultural contexts in which they grow up; that through the process of development, children formulate their own opinions about their situations, opinions that are often outspoken, idiosyncratic, and even blunt. Ultimately, children arrive at their own conclusions and meanings, which may or may not be congruent with those of the adults in their lives.

A similar perspective was put forth by Jenkins<sup>18</sup> who suggested that the commonly used adjectives such as innocent and vulnerable, timeless, and in need of our protection contribute to a narrow and deceptive picture of the realities in the lives of girls and boys. The net result of such depictions is to powerfully and effectively deny children a voice. As Jenkins observed, this notion of childhood innocence "empties the child of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfill the symbolic demands we make upon it."<sup>18(p1)</sup> This innocent child is one who wants and needs nothing, except perhaps its innocence. An important aspect of the innocence myth is that these decontextualized children somehow exist apart from the political realities that affect everyone else.

Bruner and Haste<sup>20</sup> examined the processes by which children make sense out of seemingly senseless events in their lives. Like Coles and Jenkins, these authors observed in their book, *Making Sense: The Child's Construction of the World*, that children do not simply espouse, uncritically or without

question, the ideas to which they have been exposed. Instead, the sense-making process evolves through an interplay, or dialectic, between children and their environment, ultimately leading children to arrive at their own conclusions. In essence, children spend a great deal of time striving to connect the personal and the everyday with life's "bigger issues."

Despite considerable evidence that children are not innocent, passive, or incapable of making sense out of seemingly senseless and complex events, the myth tenaciously persists. The portrayal of children as inhabitants of a world that is untainted, magical, and protected from the harshness of adult life erases the complexities of childhood and the range of experiences different children encounter. Such a construction also provides an excuse for adults to ignore responsibility for how children are firmly connected to, and shaped by, social and cultural institutions. The notion of innocence ultimately renders children invisible and silent.

### **The classless and degendered child**

Inherent in a social and historical construction of childhood is the idea that childhood cannot be understood apart from contextual variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity. In reality, taken-for-granted, universalized ideas about the child, what she/he needs, and what is in her/his best interests are derived from androcentric, adultcentric, and eurocentric middle class values. Most investigators have given little consideration to class differences affecting childrearing approaches, and much of what counts as knowledge regarding children is derived from documents and artifacts produced by or for the middle and upper classes in North America and Europe.<sup>17</sup> If conditions were considered harsh for children, the assumption is that they were harsher for working-class children. Little research has been conducted to fully understand the lives of poor children.

The tendency to extrapolate to other groups based on dominant culture findings was considered by Kitinger who noted that

sexual exploitation is an inbuilt risk “when the ideological and structural position of children in western societies, a position which locates them in an idealized world of innocence and joy, is intersected by gender relations premised on male dominance.”<sup>21(p4)</sup> Boyden<sup>22</sup> further asserted that during the 20th century, a distinctly European conception of childhood was imposed upon the Third World. The net effect was to render deviant or criminal much of the working class life and many of children’s everyday activities.

With respect to the issue of gender, constructions of children and childhood are laced with contradictions. On the one hand, gender is the most fundamental and central issue of concern for many new parents and adults in general, as evidenced by the ubiquitous first question, “Is it a girl or a boy?” From the earliest childrearing experiences, parents convey multiple meanings about their children’s behavior, the relationship between parents and other caregivers, the nature of the child’s world and, by extension, the rest of the world. Most essentially, there are numerous meta-statements about the value of that little person and how she or he ought to engage with the world in order to be valued and loved and to feel worthwhile. Included prominently are literally thousands of messages about how to behave as a girl or a boy. As these messages are conveyed, they are internalized within the child’s physical, cognitive, emotional, preverbal, and verbal sense of self.

According to the psychoanalyst Chodorow,<sup>23</sup> gender is not salient to the child during early development. From her perspective, the full repertoire of gender-specific comments and behaviors, including choice of color or type of clothing, how the child is held, touched, or allowed to explore, and the tone of voice used with the child, are lost to the young child. Person and Ovesey<sup>24</sup> have concluded that such assertions are flawed and that the reality is just the opposite. In fact, these behaviors and messages become deeply embedded within the physical and unconscious experience of every human being. Gender assignment and

training become a basic organizing principle of the developing child’s identity. Through a multitude of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication from birth, and perhaps before birth, children receive and internalize understandings about their gender, and their particular place in the world.

Despite this early obsession with gender, scholarly discussions about children and childhood are characterized by a distinct lack of attention to gender and a virtual de-genderization of the child. Berman and her colleagues<sup>10</sup> have suggested that theories of child development may be more aptly described as theories of “male child development.” Similarly, discussions of *childhood* and *children* appear to have a great deal more relevance to the boy child, than they do to the girl child. In a critique of Aries’ *Centuries of Childhood*, Calvert<sup>17</sup> suggested that because much of Aries’ thesis was derived from an examination of the 17th century French school system, from which girls were excluded, a more appropriate title for his book might be *Centuries of Boyhood*. The tendency to extrapolate knowledge derived from research conducted with boys to “children” in general has permeated Western thought throughout modern times. The detrimental consequences of such practices is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Gilligan’s<sup>25</sup> research with girls. On the basis of hundreds of interviews, Gilligan concluded that Kohlberg’s stages of moral development do not reflect the way in which females approach and resolve moral issues, thereby ensuring that girls are continually placed at the lower end of the morality spectrum.

Euphemisms such as *children* and *youth* are convenient means of grouping all young people together, typically with the assumption that they comprise a homogeneous group with shared needs, wants, and social positions. Such characterizations of childhood are fraught with myth and misconception. The result is to deny children a meaningful voice, and implicitly serve to sustain existing power relationships between young and old, children and adults, and perpetuate

the processes by which girls and boys are marginalized and disempowered.

### RESEARCHING THE WORLDS OF CHILDREN

Within the nursing literature, there have been few published studies of children's everyday lives that are explicitly linked to the aims of a critical research agenda, namely social action, change, and empowerment. Kendall's research<sup>26</sup> related to the creation of culturally responsive psychotherapeutic environments for African American youth is a noteworthy exception. More recently, Pharris<sup>27</sup> described the use of Newman's hermeneutic-dialectic methodology in her research with adolescents who had been convicted of murder. Although not articulated as a study grounded in the critical paradigm, aspects of this study were clearly consistent with the goals of critical research. From an interpretive paradigmatic perspective, Faux et al<sup>28</sup> published an insightful article in which they described strategies that may be used for conducting qualitative interviews with children and adolescents. Similarly, sociologists Fine and Sandstrom<sup>29</sup> offered guidelines for doing participant observation in the context of ethnographic research with children. The approaches offered by these latter authors are extremely valuable when doing research situated in the interpretive paradigm, where the aims are to understand and describe phenomena of interest. However, when the paradigmatic perspective of the researcher is consistent with the critical paradigm, additional approaches are needed. In this section, I examine what it means to conduct research with children when empowerment is a goal, and offer several strategies for conducting critical research with children, with particular attention to the meaning of partnerships, the nature of the interview, ethical issues, and validity of the research. The ideas put forth here are done so with the understanding that they are, in every sense, a "work in progress." I look forward to the evolution of these

ideas, by myself and others, in subsequent articles.

### Children as partners

One of the hallmarks of research derived from critical social theory is the notion that, during the conduct of the investigation, the researchers and participants will join together, as partners, in a mutually reciprocal and dialogical exchange.<sup>30-32</sup> As intuitively appealing as this idea may be, it is laden with potential pitfalls and complexities. Foremost among these is the implicit assumption of equality. As others have aptly noted with respect to critical and feminist research with adult women,<sup>32</sup> power imbalances cannot be eliminated by simplistically wishing them away or denying their existence. The ability to engage in meaningful partnerships with research participants is a challenge that requires thoughtful and honest reflection in any research endeavor, regardless of the age, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, or gender of those who take part in the research. When our participants are children, these challenges are even more pronounced. Partnerships that exist in name only contribute to a sense of cynicism and futility, and more importantly, they do not work.

Rather than conceptualizing partnerships to mean shared responsibility among researchers and participants for the conduct and outcomes of the research, a more meaningful understanding of partnerships is one that focuses on the relational aspects of the research.<sup>33</sup> As Guba and Lincoln<sup>34</sup> have observed, knowers and the known can never be entirely separated. Thus, research procedures are needed that take into account the nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants, and that explicitly acknowledge the unique power imbalances that exist between adults and children.

In a Canadian study on violence in the lives of girls,<sup>2</sup> a diverse array of strategies was used to foster meaningful dialogue among researchers and participants. The broad purpose of this research was to

examine how violence becomes normalized in their everyday lives and how girls are socialized to expect violence as an inevitable part of growing up. Five research centers across Canada took part in the research, with each center focusing on a distinct form of violence. The teams at each site comprised community and academic researchers.

The research team in Ontario used journals, cameras, focus groups, and individual interviews to examine the occurrence of sexual harassment as experienced and understood by girls.<sup>10,35</sup> Throughout the course of data collection, methods were selected that were nonlinear and transparent, that were attentive to the interplay of thoughts and feelings, as well as to the issue of power. Prior to the start of each interview, a set of "interview guidelines" was provided to each participant. Included were the following:

1. You don't have to talk to us if you don't want to.
2. No one will know who you are when we write about our talks unless you, and your families, want you to be identified.
3. You don't have to answer any questions that you choose not to.
4. If there is anything you want to say but would prefer to draw a picture, or write a poem or story, you may do that as long as you agree to help us understand what it's about.
5. You will have a chance to go over with us what you have said and together we can see if there is anything you want to change or add.
6. If you tell us about any violence or abuse that is happening to you, we will have to report that information. If this happens, we will talk first about what will occur.
7. There are no right or wrong answers.
8. We will believe what you tell us.

The participants were told that the list was a suggested starting point, and that they could add to or modify the list in whatever manner they chose.

Because the categories of investigation and analysis are usually defined by the re-

searchers, who in this case were predominantly white, middle-class, and well-educated women, it was important to provide the girls a 'space' from which to shape the focus groups and interviews in a manner that made sense to them. By doing so, it became possible to break out of the restricted, pre-determined, adult-centric categories that have historically circumscribed girls' experiences. Although the research team had identified broad areas related to sexual harassment that we wished to address, we talked at length with the girls about the issues that they considered most important, and together agreed on the direction we would take. Each focus group began with an issue or question; the girls either responded or introduced new issues for the group to consider. Frequently, the girls veered away from our queries, preferring to examine more personally pressing concerns.

A common tendency across focus groups was for the participants to move beyond the categorical limits of depression, negative body-image, low self-esteem, and eating disorders and other health sequelae that were associated with sexual harassment and other forms of violence in their lives. Instead they found a space where they could boast and brag, tease or critique, be feisty, brazen, proud, and strong, angry, aggressive, and outraged. They articulated their hopes and dreams for the future and how to get what they wanted out of life. Infused throughout their stories were experiences and feelings about racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Most significantly, the control that they had over the course and conduct of the data collection phase of the research was meaningful and profound. While none of the girls who had participated in this research were involved in the development stage of the study, many have actively participated in dissemination activities across the country and it is noteworthy that several are currently working with us in the development of a follow-up study. The partnership in this context entailed a dialogue and the enactment of strategies that were based on a recognition that researchers and their child participants often

differ in their social power, lifestyles, experiences, and understanding of and expectations for the research.

### **Close encounters of a different kind: The dialogic, child-centered interview**

In a separate study with children who had encountered violence in the context of war and in their homes, several approaches were used that were designed to enhance the empowering possibilities during the data collection phase of the research.<sup>11</sup> With respect to the interview, the participants were given a choice as to whether they would be interviewed alone, or in a small group. Frequently, the children took it upon themselves to form their own groupings, usually pairs or triads. For example, several girls who had come to Canada from Bosnia and were living in close proximity to one another, asked to be interviewed together. This particular interview yielded extremely rich information and was noteworthy for several reasons. Although these girls had become close friends and knew much about one another, many of their concerns and feelings related to the war in their homeland had not been previously shared with one another. Being with people familiar to them seemed to put the children at ease, making them more comfortable with the interview than they may have been with the (adult) interviewer alone. In the process, they helped one another with their answers. As their friends told of incidents that were similar to their own, they then felt more open to sharing their own experiences. Through the course of the interview, they derived a sense of solidarity and support as they came to realize that they were not alone in many of their thoughts and fears.

The potential power of group interviews was addressed by Stevens<sup>36</sup> who used a similar approach in her research on access to health care for low income lesbians. According to Stevens, the group interviews provided a context in which individuals were

able to analyze the struggles they had encountered, simultaneously begin to collectivize their experiences, and develop a sense of empowerment as they began to see the possibilities for change. As Herman wrote, "trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging."<sup>37(p214)</sup>

Children typically have few opportunities to share the realities of their lives, particularly when those realities include painful or traumatic events. Within the body of research related to violence in the lives of children, much of the current knowledge is derived from interviews with mothers who are the designated informants about their children. This approach has many limitations, but most significant is the fact that adults often underestimate, or are unaware of, the violence their children have seen.<sup>38</sup> Under the guise of protecting the children, many in the helping professions mistakenly assume that children are not interested in discussing important, or potentially upsetting, issues. Others insist that children are unable to discuss issues of a delicate nature. This patronizing view is one that is widely held by nurses and other health and social service professionals. It is a view that was articulated to me more than once during the early stages of this research. While it is a perspective that has been challenged by several writers,<sup>18,36</sup> there are still many people who would prefer that we avoid discussions about sensitive issues with children, so as not to upset or re-traumatize them. The reality is that children want an opportunity to have their voices heard.

The group interviews provided a vehicle through which the children were able to contemplate the sources, as well as the political implications, of their feelings; to experience the power of their collective voices; and to represent those voices to others. In the process, it was possible to challenge the tendency of mainstream psychology to overindividualize problems and to overlook the relational and societal contexts through which individual selves emerge. Through the

solidarity and sense of connection attained within a group, it became possible for children to not only name their reality, but to begin to look at that reality in different, and more critical, ways.

In conducting our 'interviews' with girls, creating a 'space' in a manner that was potentially empowering required that we pay attention to the subtle and not-so-subtle dynamics that shaped the interaction, particularly with respect to power. During the interviews, or dialogues, we attended to the overall structure of what was said and how it was said, our own feelings, thoughts, questions, and confusions, and whatever shifts that occurred. In particular, we explored how girls received and internalized messages about violence in general and sexual harassment in particular, and examined how girls' violence became normalized, as well as strategies to resist that violence. In the process, we collectively challenged widely held stereotypes and ways in which girls are silenced, diminished, and trivialized. Although it is difficult to determine whether, in fact, anyone was empowered by their participation in this research, what was very clear was that all of us were changed by our engagement in this project.

### **More than "doing no harm"**

The extent to which it is possible to do critical research with children requires that we delve into a number of interrelated issues, beyond the meaning of partnerships. Graue and Walsh<sup>33</sup> suggest that at a minimum, researchers are obligated to conduct research that is ethical and to ensure that no harm results from our interactions with children. As any academic researcher knows, these criteria are what any ethics review board insist upon. At a deeper level, however, it is necessary for us to consider what we expect children to gain from their participation in our research. If empowerment is a goal, how do we know when we have achieved this goal, and what does this look like in a realistic sense? Further, we must consider the extent to which our research is being conducted

for the children, advancing their knowledge and insights regarding the phenomena under investigation.

Mayall<sup>39</sup> suggests some possibilities and constraints in her discussion of equalizing the power relations with children. According to Mayall, the use of enabling data collection methods and the inclusion of children in analyses of the data and in the dissemination of findings help to redress the imbalances. At the same time, she acknowledges the complexities inherent in the process. Regardless of how engaged children are in all stages of the research, a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of children's social status and structural positioning often necessitates a distinct set of skills and knowledge that many children typically do not possess. Thus, there is an important respect in which research cannot be wholly for the children researched. Still, as Mayall stated, "though the representation of children's views may be only partially accurate and may be mediated by the adult researcher's concerns and interests, the attempt must be made to forward children's interests, both theoretically and through attention to the structures which control their lives."<sup>39</sup>(pp11-12)

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The critical paradigm has gained growing acceptance within nursing in recent years. As those who situate their work within this framework know, a fundamental challenge has been the articulation of appropriate and practical research methods and approaches. While this body of knowledge has increased, little is known about critical and feminist research methods and methodologies when our participants are children. However, it is clear that when a central aim of the research is the empowerment of children, strategies are required that are relevant, appropriate, and sensitive to the needs of this group. At minimum, it is essential that children be fully informed as to the nature of the research, and how their involvement will contribute to the

overall project, expectations concerning their participation, as well as potential risks and benefits of the research. Although ethics committees normally require consent from parents and assent from the children, such procedures do not necessarily equate with fully informed consent. Children require an understanding of how the information they provide will be used in the particular study and more broadly. As well, final results of the research should be shared with the children in a manner that makes sense to them and in a way that affords them a meaningful voice into the conclusions that are drawn and how these conclusions are used and communicated.

Throughout the decades, children have been silenced and marginalized. Much of what is known about children is based on what their parents have told us on behalf of their children. The enthusiasm demonstrated by the children who have participated in studies conducted by myself and my colleagues indicates that children want an opportunity to talk about important events in their lives. They have rights and they have perspectives. As researchers, it is our responsibility to ensure that we ask the right questions, and that we conduct our research in a manner that ensures that their voices and perspectives will be listened to, and heard.

## REFERENCES

- Helleiner J. Feminism and anthropology of childhood. In: Proceedings of the Symposium on Child Research Into the 21st Century; 2000. Ottawa, Canada: Carlton University/University of Ottawa.
- Berman H, Jiwani Y, eds. *In the Best Interests of the Girl Child*. Ottawa, Canada: Status of Women Canada; 2002.
- Randall M, Haskell L. Gender analysis, inequality, and violence: the lives of girls. Unpublished manuscript; 2000.
- Hall JM, Stevens PE. Rigor in feminist research. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1991;13(3):16-29.
- Parker B, McFarlane J. Feminist theory and nursing: an empowerment model for research. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1991;13(3):59-67.
- Henderson DJ. Consciousness raising in participatory research: method and methodology for emancipatory nursing inquiry. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1995;17(3):58-69.
- Harding S. Introduction. Is there a feminist method? In: Harding S, ed. *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1987:1-14.
- Webb C. Feminist research: methodology, methods, and evaluation. *J Adv Nurs*. 1993;18:416-423.
- Berman H, Ford-Gilboe M, Moutrey B, Cekic S. Portraits of pain and promise: a photographic study of Bosnian youth. *Can J Nurs Res*. 2001;32(4):21-41.
- Berman H, McKenna K, Traher Arnold C, MacQuarrie B, Taylor G. Sexual harassment: everyday violence in the lives of girls and women. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 2000;22(4):32-46.
- Berman H. Stories of growing up amid violence by refugee children of war and children of battered women living in Canada. *Image J Nurs Scholarsh*. 1999;31(1):57-63.
- Aries P. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York: Vintage Books; 1962.
- Aries P. From immodesty to innocence. In: Jenkins H, ed. *The Children's Culture Reader*. NY: New York University Press; 1998:41-57.
- Hunt D. *Parents and Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France*. New York, NY: Basic Books; 1970.
- DeMause L. *The History of Childhood*. London: Souvenir Press; 1976.
- Pollock L. *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations From 1500-1900*. Cambridge, England, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1983.
- Calvert K. Children in the house: the material culture of early childhood. In: Jenkins H, ed. *The Children's Culture Reader*. NY: New York University Press; 1998:67-80.
- Jenkins H. Childhood innocence and other modern myths. In: Jenkins H, ed. *The Children's Culture Reader*. NY: New York University Press; 1998:1-37.
- Coles R. *The Political Life of Children*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly; 1986.
- Bruner J, Haste H. *Making Sense: The Child's Construction of Reality*. New York, NY: Methuen; 1987.
- Kitzinger J. Who are you kidding? Children, power, and the struggle against sexual abuse. In: James A, Prout A, eds. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. London: Falmer Press; 1997:165-189.
- Boyden J. Childhood and the policy makers: a comparative perspective on the globalization of childhood. In: James A, Prout A, eds. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. London: Falmer Press; 1997:190-215.
- Chodorow N. *The Reproduction of Mothering*:

- Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press; 1978.
24. Person ES, Ovesey L. Psychoanalytic theories of gender identity disorder. *J Am Acad Psychoanal*. 1983;11(2):203-226.
  25. Gilligan C. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; 1982.
  26. Kendall J. Creating a culturally responsive psychotherapeutic environment for African American Youths: A critical analysis. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1996;18(4):11-28.
  27. Pharris MD. Coming to know ourselves as community through a nursing partnership with adolescents convicted of murder. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 2002;24(3):21-42.
  28. Faux SA, Walsh M, Deatrick J. Intensive interviewing with children and adolescents. *West J Nurs Res*. 1988;10:180-194.
  29. Fine GA, Sandstrom KL. *Knowing Children: Participant Observation With Minors*. Newbury Park, Calif: Sage; 1988.
  30. Berman H, Ford-Gilboe M, Campbell J. Combining stories and numbers: a methodological approach for a critical nursing science. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1998;21(1):1-15.
  31. Lather P. *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/in the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge, Chapman, & Hall; 1991.
  32. Campbell JC, Bunting S. Voices and paradigms: perspectives on critical and feminist theory in nursing. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1991;13(3):1-15.
  33. Graue ME, Walsh DJ. *Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods, and Ethics*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage; 1998.
  34. Guba EG, Lincoln YS. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In: Denzin NK, Lincoln YS, eds. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage; 1994:105-117.
  35. Berman H, Pittman-Stratman A, Izumi J, Arnold C, Hunt K. Sexual harassment: the unacknowledged face of violence in the lives of girls. In: Berman H, Jiwani Y, eds. *In the Best Interests of the Girl Child*. Ottawa, Canada: Status of Women Canada; 2002.
  36. Stevens PE. Marginalized women's access to health care: a feminist narrative analysis. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1993;16(2):39-56.
  37. Herman JL. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books; 1992.
  38. Martinez P, Richters JE. The NIMH community violence project, II: Children's distress symptoms associated with violence exposure. *Psychiatry Interpers Biol Processes*. 1993;56(1):22-35.
  39. Mayall B. Introduction. In: Mayall B, ed. *Children's Childboods Observed and Experienced*. London: Falmer Press; 1994:1-12.