Improper participatory child research: Morally bad, or not? Reflections from the “Reconstructing Cambodian Childhoods” study
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Introduction
Prompted by widespread global interest in, and commitment to, children’s rights and the establishment of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, the past twenty years have seen an explosion of participatory research aimed at eliciting children’s unique views on social life. Participatory research aims to involve actively, in some or all stages of research, persons who have been traditionally denied the right to speak for themselves (Pain, 2004), such as children. Within the participatory literature, marginalized persons are perceived as being “epistemologically privileged” - i.e. best placed to produce situated knowledge on their own lives (Balen et al, 2006:31). Empowering typically silenced persons to participate in research is also thought to increase the effectiveness, and therefore cost/time efficiency, of future community programs (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995).

Having accepted children’s rightful role as research collaborators, participatory researchers are today focused on exploring the degree to which, and ways whereby, children can and should be involved in research. To this end, numerous checklists and continuums have been put forth as barometers of children’s involvement in participatory processes (e.g. Chawla, 2001; Hart, 1992; Thomas, 2000). According to these tools, studies in which children are more highly involved in the research are regarded as morally superior to those that are adult-initiated and controlled. This is because they do not aim to empower children at the adults’ expense, but rather position children as “co-researchers” who are authentically inside the childhood experience and have the capacity to shape actively the research process. In Hart’s (1992) often-cited “ladder of participation”, for instance, progression from lower to upper levels represents a gradual shift in the balance of power in favour of the child. At the ‘ideal’ or ‘proper’ level of children’s participation (Level 8), children initiate a research project and then collaborate and share decisions with adults. Otherwise stated, they work with, rather than against or outside, the view of adults, who in turn support them in designing, implementing,
analyzing, reporting, and acting on research findings (Warren, 2000). By comparison, in more traditional studies that sit at the bottom of Hart’s “ladder of participation”, children may be consulted or engaged in sharing their voice during the project. However, they are not given the opportunity to become involved in designing or running the research along their own lines. Ultimately, so-called ‘non-participatory’ child research involves children “merely act[ing]… out premeditated roles” that are selected for them by adults. Accordingly, research projects that follow this model are vilified as examples of “manipulation,” “decoration,” or “tokenism” (Hart, 1992: 9 - 10).

Essentially, the literature has created a moral binary of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ research in which more participatory research is privileged over less participatory research. This bifurcated way of thinking is problematic, as it leads to the dismissal of the gulf between the rhetoric of participation and actual practice (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). It also encourages researchers to emulate previous participatory studies that report significant success in terms of social and political change, which may result in severe disillusionment should their own work fail to revolutionize children’s lives (see Klocker, 2008). Yet, in certain kinds of study, it may be entirely appropriate to look beyond participants’ perspectives or to only include them indirectly. As Hill (1997) notes, what is important is that their perspectives are represented within scholarship more broadly, not in each and every study.

In this article, I reflect upon my PhD fieldwork - conducted in Siem Reap town, Cambodia - to explore the practicability of conducting ‘proper’ participatory child research in Majority World (i.e. developing country) settings. I begin with a brief discussion of the so-called “epistemological break” (James et al, 1998), which encouraged many childhood researchers, including myself, to engage in the global movement to socially reconstruct childhood by engaging children in participatory research. Then, after briefly outlining the study design, I draw upon findings from my research to explore the multiple barriers to, and disincentives for, conducting participatory child research that is regarded as sufficiently involving children. Through this process, I seek to dispel the myth that adult-initiated and -led research that fails, for any number of reasons, to take children’s participation to ‘proper’ levels is necessarily inferior to that which “give[s] life to the potential in young people” by supporting their self-initiated research projects (Hart, 1992: 14). This is a critical argument - all but missing from the literature - that affirms the fact that researchers’ failure to achieve participatory ideals
does not necessarily constitute negligence on their part. Rather, it merely reflects the complex nature of participatory child research.

**Reconstructing childhood through participatory child research**

The scholarly study of childhood was ignited via the “child study movement” of the 1880s (Brooks-Gunn and Johnson, 2006), which in turn fostered the emergence of the sub-discipline of developmental psychology (Zenderland, 1988). For the greater part of the twentieth century, researchers worked within psychological paradigms that regard children as vulnerable, passive beings not capable - because of their lack of developmental maturity - of being social actors in their own right. Accordingly, research was conventionally conducted on or about children as part of a process to measure and normalize childhood and evaluate children’s progress towards full personhood (Mayall, 2000; Wyness, 2006).

Beginning in the 1970s, however, a paradigmatic shift took hold, whereby children were increasingly recognized as "sentient beings who can act with intention" (Greene and Hill, 2005: 3) and who have not only future value, but present value, as well. Alongside the rise of the social (Prout, 2005), it was also realised that children, not adults, are the ones who in fact have the expert knowledge on childhood (Hardman, 1973). Researchers thus began to argue for children's conceptual autonomy in research, and children slowly became the focus of analysis - i.e. children, as opposed to child variables, were studied (Alderson, 2000; Christensen and Prout, 2005; Corsaro, 2005). At first, research was conducted on children - that is, children were invited to answer questions that had been pre-formulated by adults (Hill, 1997). In the late 1980s, this trend gave way to conducting research with children. Fuelled by the widespread adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the simultaneous rise of the children’s rights movement, children were characterised as having the right to contribute to decision-making processes on matters affecting their lives. Henceforth, researchers (as practitioners) began to design consultative projects that asked children to provide their views and opinions on different social issues. Yet, rarely were children encouraged to contribute directly to the agenda-setting and conduct of research (Hill, 1997).

Nowadays, researchers are urged to take children’s participation beyond the consultative model by a “judgmental literature” that is highly critical of adult-led participatory research
(Klocker, 2008: 311). From the perspective of participatory ‘purists’, adult-led studies do too little to redress the imbalance of power between adults and children in research. That is, they do not go far enough in providing children with meaningful opportunities to exercise their participation rights. According to Kellett et al, only by empowering children to initiate and drive research projects themselves can we “hope to acquire the richness of knowledge that is inherent in children’s own understanding of their worlds and subcultures” (2004:331). Put simply, research by children is the model of choice that researchers are currently encouraged to employ.

But how practical is it for researchers to engage in ‘proper’ participatory research if, among other things, the children with whom they wish to engage are not used to being treated as equals by adults, and have never been asked to express their views freely? Are researchers being realistic in expecting children to initiate and conduct research themselves, even with adult support? Or, are they being too brash in introducing a western/Eurocentric model of childhood that promotes individualism, which is traditionally of lesser importance than collective values in many Majority World settings? Additionally, participatory research circumvents many traditional research orthodoxies, such as the researcher-researched power misbalance. Given such novelty, will researchers’ universities support them - directly or indirectly - in conducting highly participatory projects? Or, do the structures of academia overtly inhibit participatory child research?

But perhaps more importantly, how ethically appropriate is it to encourage children to reconstruct longstanding norms, values, and ideologies around childhood when, for example, it is known that in doing so, children may be viewed as disrupting the social order and thus be disciplined? In Majority World societies, parents often resist the concept of child rights for the reason that children are perceived as still requiring the oversight and control of adults (for example, see Brown 2001). Further, many of these societies lack well-developed, state-run child protection systems that operate with a mandate to promote children’s optimal development and intervene in cases of child maltreatment. In working within a human rights framework, participatory child researchers are implicitly mandated to act in the “best interests of the child”. However, can researchers fulfill their protective obligations toward children when the principles guiding their research clash with or oppose the cultural values of the particular settings in which they are working? For example, is it possible or appropriate for them to work
with children beyond the sight of their parents (or other primary socialisers) so they can more fully access children’s perspectives on the modernisation of childhood? Or, would this merely raise different issues of risk/harm? If so, is it ethical for researchers knowingly to engage children at levels that supersede what is locally accepted? In this paper, I critically explore these questions, drawing on the data from my recent research in Cambodia in order to highlight the differences between the rhetoric of participatory child research and the reality.

The “Reconstructing Cambodian Childhods” study: an overview

The “Reconstructing Cambodian Children and Childhoods” study, hereinafter referred to as the Cambodian study, was conducted over a ten-month period in 2007–2008 in a village on the outskirts of Siem Reap town, northwest Cambodia. I led the study with the assistance of three local research assistants (RAs; two female and one male), all of whom held a Bachelor's degree or higher, had experience in conducting social research, and received comprehensive two-week training on qualitative research methods prior to entering the field. Although somewhat unusual for a PhD researcher to have full-time research assistants, especially more than one, because of my lack of familiarity with Cambodian culture and limited time for fieldwork, I saw it as advantageous to work with people who could provide me with cultural guidance. I also observed that, during the first phase of the fieldwork (September - December, 2007), the village boys withheld from deep discussions of personal matters with women, which necessitated the employment of a young male researcher. At times the RAs worked in collaboration with me, and at times they worked independently. Daily mentoring was provided by way of formal breakfast meetings and informal dinner discussions. Employing “investigator triangulation” (by comparing the data collected by the RAs and by me) was invaluable in that it brought rigour to the research (Denzin, 1970).

The primary aim of the study was to examine how, why, and with what effect competing discourses of childhood are operating to stimulate the reconstruction of Cambodian childhoods. While persons of varying ages were included in the sample, children were regarded as the primary participant group. Significant effort was directed at supporting children to express their experiences of growing up amid rapid socio-cultural change. Therefore, structures for children’s engagement in decision-making were incorporated into the research design. For example, at the time of recruitment, children were asked to nominate their own pseudonym. They were also involved in selecting interview times and locations,
validating the data by participating in open, informal conversations, and refining the design of multiple task-based activities (discussed below). Promoting children’s participation rights was part of my personal philosophy on childhood, developed in the years leading up to the study when I worked as an occupational therapist/community development worker for various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Vietnam and Nepal. While living in Asia, I had numerous encounters with vulnerable yet driven children who, in search of a better life for their family and themselves, willingly engaged with some of the opportunities open to them. This led me to advocate that children be regarded as social actors who can and should play a part in decisions affecting the shape of their lives.

Given my status as an ‘outsider’ to the study group - though having previously travelled through Cambodia, I had neither lived nor worked there - ethnographic strategies were employed to generate rich and layered qualitative data. Ethnography is regarded as an especially useful methodology for studying childhood (James et al, 1998): by demanding they take direct part in their daily lives, it affords researchers access to the often ‘secret’ worlds of children (Emond, 2005). Access to children was gained by repeatedly ‘hanging out’ at places in the village that children frequented, such as the gaming area behind the market and language school established by a local Buddhist monk. As recommended by Feldman et al (2003), the researchers also developed relationships with gatekeepers (e.g. the village chief, Buddhist monks, teachers), all of whom lived in or nearby the village and had extensive contact with local children and families.

Establishing an initial relationship with the children was relatively straightforward; living in a tourist town, they were familiar with and interested in foreigners. Furthermore, based on their past exposure to global philanthropy, they saw the researchers as a potential source of material or educational support. Building trust with the children was more challenging, however, as they were not experienced in openly conversing with adults. My experiences in the village indicated that traditional ideas of childhood, including children’s subservience to adults, continue in contemporary Cambodia despite shifts in the socio-cultural and economic environments. By showing a genuine interest in learning about Cambodian childhoods, and engaging in acts of reciprocity such as sharing snacks and bicycles, the children gradually began to open up about their social world. By the end of the fieldwork, many were regularly coming by the researchers’ house with invitations to participate in play and other activities.
Alongside participant observation, data were also collected through the familiar method of interview. In total, 39 children aged between 9 and 17 years were recruited for individual, joint and/or group interviews, 19 (49%) of whom were girls and 20 (51%) boys. The majority came from lower-class families whose parents were un- or underemployed. Similarly, almost all (30 - 13 males and 17 females) attended school at the time of the study. Of the 9 who were not studying, only 2 had absolutely no education. Christensen and James argue that while childhood researchers “need … not adopt different methods per se,” they must “adopt practices which resonate with children’s own concerns and routines” (2000: 7). Accordingly, the child interviews were infused with a range of task-based activities aimed at stimulating the children’s imagination and memory, focusing their attention, encouraging their reflexivity, providing space for thinking, and making the research fun. Acknowledging that that there is no single best method for understanding children’s points of view (Hill, 2006; Punch, 2002), multiple task-based activities were chosen for trial in the study (see Table 1), although for reasons outlined below, it was unfortunately not possible to engage the children in developing these activities.

Additionally, the child participants were engaged in warm-up and cool-down sessions at the start and finish of each interview. Warm-up comprised active activities such as free-drawing, joke-telling or game-playing. In contrast, cool-down was a reflective period during which the interviewer read a series of unfinished sentences about the participatory child-research process and asked the children to “finish the sentences with whatever emotion you first think of.” During the first phase of the fieldwork, the sentence-completion activity was of limited success, as most children encountered difficulties in verbalizing their emotions without cues. Therefore, during the second phase of the fieldwork (January - June, 2008) the children were asked to complete the sentence by pointing to one of five gradated emotion cards (very happy, happy, normal, unhappy, very unhappy). While this method proved slightly more effective, the children continued to withhold from sharing direct negative feedback about the research (discussed in further detail below).
Table 1 - Overview of “task-based activities” incorporated into child interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity number / name</th>
<th>Task-based activities used</th>
<th>Activity overview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Who is a child? Who is an adult? | ▪ Pictures as stimulus materials  
▪ Free pile-sorting | The child participants are asked to articulate their perceptions of the similarities and differences between children and adults by sorting a set of picture cards into piles along a life-span trajectory according to their own criteria. The researchers prompt the children to talk about the capacities, needs, roles, and responsibilities of the people who occupy each of the life stages identified. |
| 2. Attitudes towards children and adults | ▪ Free-listing  
▪ Constrained pile-sorting | The child participants are invited to develop a free list of the characteristics and behaviors of "good" versus "bad" children and adults. They are then asked to discuss how identify factor influence children's social status by sorting a set of cards containing descriptions of different child sub-groups into three piles: 'all good children', 'all bad children', and 'some children are good / some children are bad.' |
| 3. My relationships | ▪ Social-network mapping | The child participants are encouraged to discuss the details of their current social networks and interpersonal relationships by gluing a paper figure (either male or female, depending on their own gender) onto a sheet of blank paper and then drawing figures representing the people they love, hate, spend a lot of time with, are afraid of, and so on. The researcher uses this drawing as a prompt for detailed discussion of the child's feelings and concerns. |
| 4. My day | ▪ Time-use charts | The child participants are asked to reflect upon the ways in which they spend their time during an average day by writing or drawing all of those activities they do on a regular basis inside a large circle, which has been pre-drawn on a blank sheet of paper. |
Reflections on conducting participatory child research

Jones (2004) argues that social researchers must engage in critical reflective practice throughout the research process, so as to maximise their learning opportunities and circumvent the exploitation or coercion of participants. Accordingly, I now share my reflections on the challenges encountered in collecting, analysing, and writing up the findings of the Cambodian study. Specifically, I examine the reasons why particular research activities did not work out in quite the kind of way that the new participatory child research orthodoxy champions - i.e. why I found myself conducting research with children as opposed to facilitating research by children.

Collecting the data

In the modern, Western construction of childhood, children are presented as vulnerable, passive victims. Within the participatory literature, they are rendered a “socially excluded, minority group struggling to find a voice” (Kellett et al, 2004:330). By contradiction, this data indicates that Cambodian children are not only capable of, but indeed are largely willing to—in their own preferred ways—mediate their participation in everyday activities, including research. More simply, it was the children themselves who determined whether or not to participate in the research, and if so, to what extent. However, as I now outline, their desired level of involvement in the research was not congruent with that advocated by the “proper” participatory child research model.

Eliciting and reporting on children’s evaluations of their own research participation is considered imperative to the collaborative research process (Hill, 2006). As only rudimentary data on this topic was gathered via the sentence completion activity, my RAs and I developed a structured, choice-based game to be played by the children during the farewell parties that were being held just prior to the completion of the fieldwork. We hoped that, by engaging the children on a group basis, they would feel less inhibited about sharing their feelings with the researchers. A total of 31 children (16 girls and 15 boys) participated in this game, hereinafter referred to as the ‘being a child participant’ game. Each child was handed a set of cards that had been numbered 1 to 18 and was then instructed to stand in a group. Two boxes were placed about five metres from the group on either side. An RA would ask a question - there were 18 total - with two possible answers; each box represented a possible answer, and the children were asked to run to whichever box corresponded with the answer they wished to
give. Upon reaching the box, the child placed the card that corresponded with the question number inside. The researcher asked the questions in an excited tone, which encouraged the children to move quickly rather than pausing to see the direction in which their friends were running. Following the completion of the game, the researchers conducted group interviews with the children to explore any surprising trends in their responses (see Figure 1).

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

**Figure 1: Children share their views on participating in the research at one of the farewell parties (author’s own photograph)**

The data collected through this game are detailed in Table 2. During data analysis, these findings were triangulated with: 1) the RAs’ views on engaging Cambodian children in the research, obtained through informal conversations and two in-depth interviews conducted at the completion of the fieldwork; and 2), data from the RAs’, as well as my own, field diaries.

Before discussing children’s agency in the research process, it is critical to note that parents rarely intervened in their children’s research participation. In fact, in all except one case, they willingly consented to, and even actively encouraged, the child’s involvement. Throughout the fieldwork, parents repeatedly discussed their struggles in morally educating their children. Kunthea, a 36-year-old mother, for example, commented with exasperation, “I do nothing to make him difficult but he does not follow me. He does not listen to me”. Vanna, a 47-year-old mother, communicated similar despondency. “I want to educate my children well but they are not like me. They do not follow us. They like to play a lot. For example, when
I talk to them they walk away. What do I do?” In consenting to or actively promoting their children’s research participation, parents hoped that their sons and daughters would learn virtue from the researchers, whom they saw as highly educated, well-salaried persons, capable of acting as good moral role models for the children. When discussing the value of children to the family and community Tola, a 36-year-old mother, commented, “They are university students. They help people in their community. For example, they become a teacher like older sister (borng) here.” As she spoke, she glanced toward the nearby group of children, as if to reinforce her point that the researchers are moral citizens whose behaviors should be modeled.

Yet rather than operating as dictators, in negotiating the consent process parents often deferred to their child’s wishes. Guided by the Theravada Buddhist belief that each person has their own destiny, shaped by the net balance of one’s accumulated merit and demerit - i.e. their karmic (kâmmic) state (van Oosten, 2008) - parents withheld from ‘forcing’ their children to participate if they refused. They saw it as their role to guide their children toward making choices that accorded with those Buddhist precepts but ultimately, they believed that their child’s behaviors are self-determined. As Pich, a 38-year-old mother, summarized, the role of a parent is to “just help to establish a good life for them.” Overall therefore, parents’ actions served to strongly yet subtly support the researchers in their efforts to conduct ‘proper’ participatory child research.

Yet most child participants, especially those of lower socioeconomic background, were hesitant about providing independent informed consent. That is, they withheld their decision to participate in an interview until after confirming that their parents had provided consent. Within the study village, children were regarded as a low-status group and, because of their perceived cognitive immaturity, were subject to social controls designed to facilitate their inclusion in mainstream society. “They are too young, they cannot think well and cannot understand deeply about many points,” 21-year-old mother Sopheap stressed, justifying adults’ control of children’s behavior. These social controls most commonly constituted physical beatings and intense emotional and psychological abuse. Given that current modes of Cambodian discipline largely meet Western definitions of child maltreatment, children were unsurprisingly observed as being distressed by even the possibility of parental punishment. Their filial respect and obedience is clearly evidenced in the results of the ‘being a child
Table 2. Child participants’ views on the design of the Cambodian study (*B = boy, G = girl)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Option 1</th>
<th>Option 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you prefer to share your thoughts and ideas with the researchers during a formal interview or informally while playing at / near your home?</td>
<td>B = 4</td>
<td>B = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 12</td>
<td>G = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you prefer to make a decision about whether or not to participate in the research on your own or follow the decision made by your parents?</td>
<td>B = 4</td>
<td>B = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 2</td>
<td>G = 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you prefer the researchers to use or not use the tape recorder?</td>
<td>B = 15</td>
<td>B = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 14</td>
<td>G = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do you prefer the researchers use your real name or your ‘fake’ name?</td>
<td>B = 0</td>
<td>B = 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 3</td>
<td>G = 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you prefer to play a game before you start the interview or just start talking with the researchers straight away?</td>
<td>B = 7</td>
<td>B = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 10</td>
<td>G = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Do you prefer to talk with a foreign or a Khmer researcher?</td>
<td>B = 2</td>
<td>B = 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 2</td>
<td>G = 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Do you prefer to be interviewed alone or together with a friend or sibling?</td>
<td>B = 7</td>
<td>B = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 7</td>
<td>G = 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you prefer to be interviewed in a quiet place alone with the researchers or do you not mind when others wander over to watch or listen?</td>
<td>B = 9</td>
<td>B = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 12</td>
<td>G = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you prefer to have a break during the interview or just keep talking?</td>
<td>B = 7</td>
<td>B = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 14</td>
<td>G = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you prefer to be interviewed in the morning or in the afternoon?</td>
<td>B = 11</td>
<td>B = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 8</td>
<td>G = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Do you prefer to be interviewed at home or somewhere else?</td>
<td>B = 9</td>
<td>B = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 11</td>
<td>G = 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Do you prefer to be able to choose the time and place of the interview or follow the researchers’ suggestion?</td>
<td>B = 9</td>
<td>B = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 9</td>
<td>G = 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you prefer to talk to a male or female researcher?</td>
<td>B = 7</td>
<td>B = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 0</td>
<td>G = 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Do you prefer that the researcher also participates in the activity or you do the activity alone?</td>
<td>B = 10</td>
<td>B = 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 12</td>
<td>G = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Do you prefer the interview to be shorter (e.g. 20–30 minutes) or longer (e.g. 50–60 minutes)?</td>
<td>B = 6</td>
<td>B = 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 11</td>
<td>G = 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Do you prefer to do something during the interview (e.g. draw, look at pictures, make a list) or simply talk to the researchers?</td>
<td>B = 9</td>
<td>B = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 9</td>
<td>G = 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Do you prefer the researchers come to the village everyday or just every now and again?</td>
<td>B = 5</td>
<td>B = 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 8</td>
<td>G = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Do you prefer to tell the researchers something (e.g. a problem, question, good/bad news) by writing a note for them or simply by talking with the researchers if/when you meet with them?</td>
<td>B = 4</td>
<td>B = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G = 3</td>
<td>G = 13</td>
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participant’ game. When asked whether they preferred to follow their parents’ decision or make an independent choice regarding their research involvement, 80% of children chose the former option (see Table 2, Question 2). Further, during the fieldwork only one of 40 children directly dissented to an interview.
Still, children were far from passive throughout the research process. Rather, they negotiated the nature and degree of their participation in less confrontational ways on the basis of their daringness to challenge traditional child-adult power inequalities. Some, including 13-year-old Lena, were motivated to negotiate parental consent without the assistance of the researchers so as to ensure their active involvement:

Researcher 1: When I came to meet you and asked you to participate in an interview, how did you feel?
Lena: I felt happy.
Researcher 1: Why?
Lena: Because I had time to participate and nobody blamed me. And, because my mother allowed me to join with the researchers.
Researcher 2: If we didn’t ask your mother would you be worried?
Lena: If you didn’t ask my mother I would have asked her by myself because I wanted to join with you.

In contrast, others who assented to an interview but were not in fact interested in participating, of whom there was several, communicated their lack of interest indirectly, withdrawing from the study by avoiding making an interview time. Initially, I interpreted the avoidance behaviors of children such as 17-year-old Makara as rudeness:

I am frustrated by Makara’s behaviour. His failure to let us know beforehand that he would not be able to participate in an interview today was downright rude. Whilst indeed still a child as per Cambodian law, the boy is 17 years old and studies in the 7th Grade [...] We recruited him for the interview 5 or 6 days previously, meaning he has also had ample time to come talk to us while we are working in the village. We are there almost every day. (Fieldnotes, Siem Reap town, 17 November 2007).

Over time, however, I noted that the child participants were extremely competent at nominating a suitable time and place of interview. For instance, of those who partook in the ‘being a child participant’ game, 58% indicated that they preferred to decide on the scheduling and location of the interview themselves rather than follow adult instructions. Accordingly,
failure to schedule an interview time came to be regarded a sign of lack of interest in the research.

With encouragement, most of the child participants were somewhat willing to shape the research processes. For instance, 12-year-old Rasmey, a girl, brought a friend to the interview even though an individual session had been planned. She had been advised during the consent process that she need not be interviewed alone and acted on the researcher’s offer by eliciting her peer’s support. 14-year-old Dara, on the other hand, clearly preferred to speak privately with the researchers. He communicated this by becoming verbally agitated or self-silencing when another child (or adult) wandered too close during the interview. For example, after discovering his sister hiding behind a nearby fence, he promptly hushed the researchers and then informed them that he needed to return home to check on his nephew. Yet, as he ran off, his sister called out to him, “The baby is not waking up, Dara,” revealing his fib.

Overall however, as Dara’s example suggests, the children were generally too fearful to directly challenge researchers’ requests or suggestions and maximize their own participation, even when consistently reassured that their participation was welcomed and valued. For instance, they would not inform the researchers if they wished to stop or pause the interview. Only a handful were willing to pick up, point to, or even look at the yellow ‘stop’ card, which was placed on the ground next to the child at the start of every interview. When they did use the card, it was to indicate their desire to use the bathroom, not to terminate the interview. The children were also too reserved to direct the research in the way demanded by the ‘proper’ participatory child research model. Upon being asked to make suggestions for alternative task-based activities that the researchers could use to collect data, for example, the children shook their heads and stated they could not think of any ideas better than those of the researchers.

Alongside the children’s reluctance to embrace their newfound research roles, having staff who neither understood nor agreed with the principles of ‘proper’ participatory child research also created tensions. Child-adult relations in Cambodia are characterised by a significant power differential. When asked whether children are ever involved in supporting adults to make family or community-level decisions, Veasna, a 44-year-old NGO worker, laughed
loudly and stated, “I don’t think so… their parents are their representatives”. As such, the RAs - in particular the male RA, Samnang - initially conducted the child interviews in a didactic fashion, asking question after question of the children, rather than allowing them to direct conversations. Samnang also withheld from actively participating in everyday activities regarded by the villagers as being only appropriate for children, such as playing games:

Today I went to the village briefly with Samnang to assist him in identifying children he may like to invite to participate in an interview [...] I encouraged him to tell the children that he wanted to play a game of snooker with them, but he replied by saying “I do not know how to play”. He also cringed when a child asked him to accompany him to find a mango tree from which he could collect some mangos. I had to push Samnang several times, saying that it is his job to go along with the children’s play ideas. He finally accepted this, but not very willingly. (Fieldnotes, Siem Reap town, 4 March 2008).

Only through intensive daily mentoring and repeated observations of children’s agency did Samnang come to recognize the children as social actors, both capable of and entitled to sharing decisions. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) argue that the key element of participatory research lies not in the methods but rather in the attitudes of the researchers. Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that in seeking to conduct ‘proper’ participatory child research, researchers must reflect upon their own as well as their staffs’ behavioral expectations of, and skills for working with, children.

**Analysing and writing-up the data**

As already argued, ‘proper’ participatory child research also demands that children operate as active data-analysers and writers. But again, researchers are likely to encounter challenges to involving children in these research tasks, largely because of the fundamental mismatch between the cultures of academia and participatory research. Here, I write in terms of the methodological and professional challenges postgraduate students may experience, simply because this research was conducted as a PhD project, although even experienced researchers who conduct participatory child research in Majority World settings are likely to face similar dilemmas.
In Australia, as elsewhere, postgraduate study is designed to equip students with specialist knowledge on a particular subject, as well as the skills to conduct high-quality, independent research. The production of a major piece of work - the thesis - is regarded as critical to demonstrating the acquisition of these skills. This is because, “it is by working on a thesis that one learns how to develop a research project and see it through to a conclusion; how to use and develop appropriate methodologies; how to struggle with the demons of writing and hold them at bay” (Manderson, 1996: 408). Universities have therefore traditionally required that theses be ascribed sole-authorship.

Today, however, the requirements for obtaining a doctorate are slowly evolving with the introduction of the ‘thesis-by-publication’ model, now endorsed by most major Australian universities and even preferred by some (e.g. Macquarie University; see www.musec.mq.edu.au). In this alternative model of thesis preparation, the student submits a portfolio of peer-review publications (journal papers, book chapters, etc.) that have been published, or accepted/submitted for publication, during the period of their candidature, as opposed to a standard dissertation. In recognition of the fact that scientific research increasingly demands teamwork (Gannon, 2006), some of these papers may be co-authored. In the case of co-authored works, the student must take a leading role in the paper’s preparation, as well as declaring their individual contribution to the thesis examiners.

Theoretically, then, students who choose to prepare their thesis ‘by publication’ have the scope to engage the research participants, including children, in the analysis and writing-up processes. However, even if the student recognises their participants’ intellectual competence, expecting participants - especially illiterate participants - to analyse and write-up data in ways that meet the rigorous standards of academic publishing is, in most circumstances, unrealistic. In the Cambodian study, the child participants had an average of 4.5 years schooling. Many, in particular adolescent boys who, because of their frequent display of so-called immoral behaviors, were viewed by society as socially ‘deviant’, preferred to share their thoughts with the researchers in the context of participant observation rather than interviews (see Table 2, Question 1). When questioned as to why, they referred to their negative school experiences, which had eroded their confidence to answer ‘teacherly’ questions.
Moreover, although designed (in part) to make the research ‘fun’, many children viewed the task-based activities as resembling schoolwork. Consequently, when asked to read, draw or write, they strongly preferred the researchers also to participate, acting as role models for the activity (see Table 2, Question 16). Even the better-educated children shied away from putting pen to paper. Several, especially the older girls, became quickly absorbed in the conversation. About 5 minutes after the start of her interview, after providing a detailed description of her daily schedule, 17-year-old Roat proclaimed, “Oh! I’m talking. I forgot to draw!” For others, drawing or writing was viewed as being too onerous. When presented with the social-network mapping sheet, 17-year-old Larng, who studies in 9th grade, inquired as to whether she should write or draw on the sheet. The researcher replied that the option was hers, to which she replied, “OK, talking is better. I’m too lazy to write.” In such circumstances, encouraging the children to participate in the data analysis and writing-up processes would in fact be going against the children’s subtly communicated desires.

My decision against actively encouraging the children’s involvement in these tasks was also influenced by the children’s preference to work with the RAs. Most of the children who participated in the ‘being a child participant’ game - 27 children out of a total 31 - indicated that they preferred to talk with a Cambodian as opposed to foreign researcher. Their reasons for this were twofold. First, some admitted to having difficulty in understanding my speech because of my “peculiar” accent. Though anthropologists have slowly come to realize the necessity and feasibility of working through local translators in circumstances where a researcher’s language proficiency is lacking (Borchgrevink, 2003), I nonetheless elected to study Khmer, the official language of Cambodia, prior to entering the field. This is because I believe that language skills are critical to positively shifting the balance of power between the researcher and the researched, effectively facilitating research on sensitive topics (Watson, 2004). Accordingly, I participated in a three-month language program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the summer of 2007. Yet still, like most adult language learners, I inevitably spoke Khmer with a foreign accent. Second, several children explained (during the group interview following the ‘being a child participant’ game) that they felt a Cambodian researcher would be better able to relate to their situation and concerns. Liamputtong (2007) verifies that selecting interviewers who share demographic characteristics with the research participants can indeed aid the trust building process and therein the success of the research. Yet, in many Majority World settings, such as Cambodia, local research capacity is on the
whole poor. This points to the value of mixed research teams, through which local researchers can develop their technical research skills and expertise by working alongside foreigners.

But, in turn, I withheld from handing over the reins of the project to the RAs because throughout the fieldwork, I was constantly aware of my need to gather data that was of sufficient depth to produce a comprehensive, passable PhD. Similarly, the RAs restrained themselves from making independent decisions regarding the research process, evidenced by their frequently telephoning me from the village even though I had given them authority to problem-solve their way through minor dilemmas. I am not alone in having felt torn between the academic demands of a PhD and the collaborative demands of participatory research. Indeed, Klocker (2008) also admits to struggling with issues of trust and control because of fears regarding thesis quality. With salary increases and promotion/tenure review outcomes nowadays largely contingent upon the quality and extent of one’s publications (Youn and Price, 2009), and many journals reticent to publish articles that employ experimental forms of writing (Liamputtong, 2007), senior researchers are likely to have similar reservations about involving RAs with solid yet still developing research skills in the analysis and writing-up processes. Ultimately, until universities provide reassurance that the academic reward system will take into consideration the unpredictability of participatory research, researchers will in, all likelihood, continue to feel uneasy allowing others to strongly influence the outcomes of their projects.

‘Improper’ participatory child research: morally bad, or not?
Many researchers’ efforts at collaborating with children have been described as deceptive (Driskell, 2002) and tokenistic (Mayo, 2001) because, although they strive to enable children’s voices to be heard, in reality they fail to achieve the ideals set forth in the child-participation literature. However, as outlined above, there are multiple, largely uncontrollable factors that make it difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to conduct ‘proper’ participatory child research in Majority World settings. Furthermore, the question remains: Is ‘improper’ participatory child research morally ‘bad”? Or, as the findings of the Cambodian study suggest, are less participatory models of child research in fact more ethical in particular cultural contexts?
On the basis of the children’s reactions towards their involvement, the Cambodian study indeed achieved its objectives of facilitating child empowerment, creating new knowledge on Cambodian childhoods, and giving children ‘voice’. Almost all child participants told the researchers that prior to this research they had never been asked to share their perspectives with adults who took seriously their views. As Roat’s excerpt suggests, many were delighted by simply being given the opportunity to share their perspectives:

Researcher 1: Earlier today, before I came to conduct the interview, how did you feel?
Roat: I felt excited because it was almost time for me to give my opinion.
Researcher 1: How did you feel when you saw me arrive at your house?
Roat: I felt even more excited because it was almost time for me to have my say [laugh].

As the children’s trust in the researchers grew over time, they gained the confidence to share details of their lives and experiences. As already discussed, they also developed confidence in subtly shaping the fieldwork, selecting methods and strategies that exploited their interests and talents. Because of this, rich insight was gained into many (though not all) aspects of their lives, including concerns not previously identified by researchers or local NGOs. For example, the issue of gang violence is discussed in the Cambodian literature (Wilkinson and Fletcher, 2002; Bearup, 2004), yet only briefly. The children of the Cambodian study, however, comprehensively outlined their reasons for joining - and their experiences as part of - an adolescent gang. And, while children were not involved in disseminating the research findings, their voices are included in the form of excerpts in each of the publications arising from the research.

Overall, it is difficult to envisage these child participants initiating or directing research on their lives. Had the study been conducted with children who had been more exposed to modern constructions of childhood - such as children involved with local child-rights groups or those studying at an international school - a higher level of participation may have been possible. However, the children involved in the Cambodian study had never been prepared or encouraged, through formal or informal education, to demonstrate independence and
leadership in the ways expected of Western children. In their chapter on interviewing women, a group that - like children - has been traditionally silenced in many societies, Reinhartz and Chase made a similar observation, suggesting that “[w]e need to be aware that women who have never had an opportunity to express themselves may not know what to do when given this opportunity” (2002: 225). Correspondingly, researchers are best advised to empower children progressively, not abruptly, through participatory research that is couched at a level appropriate to the research context.

In Cambodian culture, childhood is considered a time for developing a consciousness of one’s rightful position in the established social hierarchy (Smith-Hefner, 1999). In this context, failing to comply with adult-set constructions of childhood can - and as the findings of this study suggest, does - result in often severe physical, social, and emotional harm. Therefore, for researchers to expect Cambodian children to demonstrate overt agency in research is not only unreasonable, but potentially dangerous, and therefore arguably unethical. As discussed, Cambodian parents are generally supportive of their children’s research participation but, in essence, expect researchers to support them in their promotion of cultural continuity. Accordingly, how will researchers ensure children are not harshly punished at home, which is likely if they are observed - by either their parents or others who may gossip - not being submissive to persons of greater social status such as foreigners? Violence against children is common throughout Cambodia (Miles and Thomas, 2007; Save the Children and AusAID, 2006). Yet, no properly functioning child protection system operates at the village level to identify, assess, and treat abused/neglected children and their families. It is my experience that at the informal level, villagers are commonly aware of the mistreatment of individual children, yet they avoid becoming involved in what they believe to be others’ personal business, in part because of fear of retribution from the child’s relatives. Further, even when serious cases of child maltreatment are reported, little (if any) tangible support or assistance is offered to the child and/or family because of the fragmented state of the country’s social services.

Moreover, given that no child-rights NGOs operate in many areas of the country - including the study village - how can children receive ongoing encouragement for their agency following the completion of the research? If no one takes over this role, will children not become despondent and lose hope of changing power-relations between themselves and adults? If
so, are researchers’ not placing them, albeit unwittingly, at risk of emotional and psychological harm? In the light of such issues, it seems as if, for now, conducting research with Cambodian children may well be participatory enough.

Fundamentally, however, the bigger question relates - in my opinion - to the difference between the motives and thus the actions of childhood ‘activists’ versus childhood researchers. The ‘activists’ largely focus on developing children’s agency in particular localities. For example, the staff international organizations such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children invest copious resources in implementing programs with the overarching aim of realising children’s rights, one of which is their right to participation. Researchers, on the other hand, essentially seek to discover the nuances of children’s perspectives, rather than empower and change children per se. In these circumstances, who is to say that the latter activity is morally inferior to the former? It seems, to me at least, that they are simply different kinds of projects, underpinned by different agendas.

Conclusion
In conclusion, in this article I have sought to highlight the myriad challenges facing those wishing to conduct ‘proper’ participatory child research in countries such as Cambodia. I hope that by doing so, it might stimulate participatory ‘purists’ to acknowledge more openly the constraints that exist in conducting ‘proper’ participatory research in the Majority World. Ultimately, perceiving children as competent social actors does not necessarily mean that children must initiate and lead every piece of research. Likewise, conducting more traditional research is not always morally ‘bad’ should it work towards uncovering children’s perspectives. Indeed, as I have argued, in some cases it is simply neither possible, nor even desirable, to engage children fully in the research process.

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