Researching Children's Morality: developing research methods that allow children's involvement in discourses relevant to their everyday lives.

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Abstract: Contemporary children’s childhoods are full of discourses about children and right and wrong. However, the foundation for these moral debates is often based on adult assumptions about children rather than reliable knowledge obtained from them. This article therefore seeks to explore ways in which children can be involved in the research process, such that their voices can be heard. Through looking at a number of creative research tools, it argues that children can be competent and legitimate research partners within moral discourses, providing data that can inform more effective policy and practice.

Introduction
Thinking about children has been and, to a significant extent, continues to be full of adult assumptions about what children know and do not know, and what they think and why, the results of such thinking often having implications for policy. However, the opportunities for children themselves to raise awareness of how they see the world and to redress the current epistemological balance of power are limited. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the debate over children and right and wrong. Adults continue to take the view that children need to be controlled (Muncie, 2004), but all such measures seem to achieve is to draw more and more children into the criminal justice system (James and James, 2004). In order to develop effective policy and practice therefore, responses must be developed that are relevant to the lives on whom they are focused, which demands a level of understanding of the target group. Unfortunately, however, children’s participation in discourses about morality has been restricted; it has even ruled out on the grounds that children lack the competence to have any legitimate view on right and wrong.

This article seeks to move beyond this position and to present ways in which children can be engaged in the research process, with the hope that it will encourage greater
understanding of they way in which children experience their childhoods. The theoretical inspiration for this draws from the growing body of work around childhood studies, which views children not as passive objects that simply absorb all that happens around them but as social agents, with the individual capacity to construct meanings in response to the social structures in which they find themselves. It is written in the context of a specific piece of research that looked at the way in which children experience morality within their everyday lives and endeavours to explore ways in which children as social agents can be legitimate and competent partners in a quest for understanding. Such work can then be used as a foundation for policy makers to move away from a reliance on adult assumptions, allowing them to draw on reliable knowledge of children’s childhoods.

Questions of competence
Questions about their competence have long effected children, both in relation to research (James et al, 1998) and morality (Mayall, 2002). A significant voice that has shaped the way in which children have been viewed was that of developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget. Writing during the last century, Piaget sought to establish a universal, ordered and staged approach to child development (Piaget, 1967). In the context of morality, this saw moral development closely linked to age (Piaget, 1935). Indeed, Piaget argued that it was not until a child was twelve years old that they were able to think in an abstract way and thus actually know why actions were right or wrong. Before this, imitation and personal desire drove a child’s moral action, rather than any deeper recognition of meaning. This approach to children, in which they were regarded as passive objects who lacked moral competence until they reached a particular age, laid the foundation for a staged interpretation of children’s moral development, which was furthered by academics such as Lawrence Kholberg (1984).

The impact of this universal theory of children and moral development has been significant; thus, for example, Connolly (2004) argues that such attitudes, governed when children were deemed ‘ready’ to engage with certain issues. In a moral context this has seen primary schools ignore moral topics in the classroom on the basis that children were not yet ready to deal with them (Short, 1999). Also, parallels between a universal approach to children and morality based on different stages of ‘competence’ can be seen in discourses about the way in which the criminal law has and continues to deal with children (Muncie, 2004). Overall, it has contributed to providing a foundation for policy and practice to develop based on ‘knowledge of childhood’, with all the generalisations that this
entails (Oakley, 1994), rather than focusing in on ‘knowledge of a particular child’ (Lee, 1999).

In fact, it was a desire to start acknowledging the social context within which each child exists that fuelled the challenges to Piaget’s work. Researchers began to show that similar tests to those run by Piaget, which appealed to children’s everyday lives and experiences, led to different results (Donaldson and McGarrigle, 1975), questioning the extent to which children had understood what they were being asked (Wood, 1998). In reviewing some of the challenges to Piaget, Light concludes that one cannot underestimate ‘the part played by contextual sensitivity in the acquisition of understanding’ (Light, 1986: 183). Indeed, he goes on to say that one can only really seek to understand children by moving away from the ‘abstract epistemic subject of Piaget’s structuralist approach, towards the real child’s experience within specific social contexts’ (Light, 1986: 185).

These challenges reflected a growing awareness within a range of academic disciplines of the importance of recognising children as social beings. What Hardman, one of the early proponents of this emerging position suggested, was that there needed to be a move from seeing children as ‘passive objects, as helpless spectators in a pressing environment’ (Hardman, 1973: 87). Rather, she said, ‘my proposed approach regards children to be studied in their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching’ (ibid). From this theoretical basis, James and Prout (1997) drew together a joint statement on childhood from across different academic disciplines that said, amongst other things, that childhood was to be understood as a social construct and that children ‘must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live’ (James and Prout, 1997: 8). This meant that in order to understand children, adults needed to engage with them, learning from them about the way in which they saw and understood the social world around them. Since then, research has shown how, through deconstructing our notion of childhood (Jenks, 2000) and seeing children as drawing meaning from their separate social experiences, challenges have emerged to the adult assumptions that have made up so much of past thinking in relation to children (James and James, 2004; Connolly, 2004).

The recognition of children as agents with the capacity to give meaning to their actions has immediate implications for the way they are seen in relation to morality for in the context of social agency, morality is not, in Durkheimian terms, simply a product of the
collective that is imposed on its members. Rather, individuals are seen as capable of constructing their own notions of morality based on individual experiences and the social structures they find themselves within. But can children be moral agents? Based on the principle established above, Mayall (2002) does not doubt that children can be moral agents, although this is not always easy since ‘the child as moral agent is one we have been taught to find difficult, even a contradiction in terms’ (Mayall, 2002: 87). She challenges the work of Piaget and Kholberg through research that has recognised and acknowledged the moral qualities connected with children’s everyday activities, such as sharing and emotionally caring, with the result that even very young children can be seen to apply moral meaning to their actions (Damon, 1990; Dunn, 1988; Kagan, 1986).

Short (1999) provides a specific example of how young children show a capacity to evaluate the acceptability of their behaviour, demonstrating how children at nursery school sometimes hold discriminatory views about others on the grounds of race. What is significant about this research is that the children recognised that they should hide such views in the presence of adults. The realisation that even children as young as two have some moral awareness means that adults need to recognise and encourage the individual’s moral development, rather than waiting for them to achieve a certain age-based ‘competence’, as Piagetian theories suggest. Haste (1999) observes that, for teachers, this means taking on increased interest in the moral development of the children in their care, remembering that children approach moral issues from different perspectives, even though the basis of these positions is a shared culture (Pollard, 1985). It is, therefore, important for all adults to continue to recognise and reflect on the way in which children respond to moral issues, taking into account the different experiences of children, and to remember that ‘moral development… is a continual dialectic’ changing with further experiences (Haste, 1999: 192).

This raises further questions about habitus (Connolly, 2004), which is outside the scope of this article; however, it demonstrates clearly that when considering issues of morality in relation to children, one must be aware of the social context within which each individual child lives their life. Mayall (2002) ends her review of the moral child saying that,

Perhaps the moral status of childhood provides the most dramatic instance of misfit between the adult structuring of childhood and young people’s own knowledge and experience. Young people find that adults routinely reject or ignore their moral
competence, yet they do engage with moral issues ... A further twist to this tangle is that adults also expect young people to take moral responsibility both at home and at school [and particularly in the neighbourhood]. This adult neglect and indeed conceptual misunderstanding accounts for one of the strongest findings ... that children find their participation rights are not respected. This misfit between experience and societal concepts has to be explained. (Mayall, 2002: 138)

What this suggests is that the awkwardness in the ways in which the ‘moral child’ is viewed has a broad impact. Indeed, Mayall argues that if this misunderstanding can be clarified, then children’s opportunities to participate more widely within society will increase. It is therefore the need to move beyond issues of age-based competence and the restrictive position laid out above that drives the rest of this article, as it explores ways of engaging with children as social agents, seeking a greater understanding of the way in which they experience issues or morality within their everyday world.

Researching children and morality
The research on which the following discussion is based sought to build on the position and ideas set out above, by considering the way in which children understand morality within their everyday lives. The participants were aged between nine and eleven years (and were therefore on or around the age of criminal responsibility - see Muncie, 2004) and they all went to one primary school in an affluent town in the East of England. The research sought to understand how far children were capable of actively engaging with moral issues, how morals were expressed and what implications this might have for adults. Within the sample group there were eighty-four children all of varying degrees of academic ability. Having acknowledged theoretically the potential of children as research participants, the task was to identify the most effective methods of engaging them in the process.

Within the context of researching morality, the research tools needed to allow a questioning of adult assumptions, as well as considering moral understanding from the perspective of the individual child. It was, therefore, important to consider both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Qvortrup (2000) argues that quantitative research allows the consideration of three key features of childhood, namely, the structural, the normative and the regulative. A brief definition of these terms helps to provide further context: the ‘structural’ refers to the generational aspect of childhood; normative influences stem from
norms and are closely linked to regulation, while the regulative refers to universal laws or majority regulation (Qvortrup, 2000). The relevance of these categories to questions of morality is touched on by Qvortrup himself, who draws on the specific example of the way in which the law imposes age divisions on children. Indeed, the basis of such laws often sees adults reinforcing the ‘normative’ in a bid to make the legislation seem more legitimate. As Qvortrup (2000) observes, the boundary between normative and regulative is often unclear with rules often starting out simply as norms. It therefore seemed appropriate for research on morality to engage in some way with quantitative research methods, in order to help build up a greater picture of those structures within which social rules develop and in which children learn about themselves.

There has been debate over whether quantitative methods fall within the bounds of the social study of childhood (James et al, 1998) but as Scott (2000) argues, in similar vein to Qvortrup, quantitative methods provide an important way of exploring the structures within which the child, as a social agent, lives their life. Whilst quantitative methods may have been seen as the reserve of those interested in the ‘positivist identification of facts’ and that qualitative techniques have been for those interested in the ‘interpretive paradigm, and the social construction of meaning’ (Tulloch, 2000), this does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. As Oakley (1999) points out, there is a need to move away from thinking that qualitative methods are the sole methodological approach for researching minority groups, for as she suggests, no longer should the methods define the nature of the topic being researched. She concluded ‘we need to examine all methods from the viewpoint of the same questions about trustworthiness, to consider how best to match methods to research questions, and to find ways of integrating a range of methods in carrying out socially useful inquiry’ (Oakley, 1999: 166). Tulloch (2000), like Oakley (1999), suggests that by combining these two techniques, one can construct social research so that it can provide not only information in relation to the micro aspects of a child’s life, but also provide a basis on which to challenge generalisable adult assumptions.

By combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques it was felt that, for my research on morality, children would be given the greatest opportunity to participate in the process of investigation. It was therefore necessary to consider how quantitative and qualitative techniques could be made relevant to the children, thus encouraging their involvement. However, as well as making the methods relevant I also wanted to inspire enthusiastic participation by the children, as this could only add to the validity of the data.
As noted earlier, assumptions about children’s limited competence has in the past limited their involvement in research; however, the developing thinking in childhood studies has seen calls for researchers to ignore issues such as age (Solberg, 1996) and to recognise that in relation to children, it is not a matter of competence but difference (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Applying this position means that researchers should not be prevented from using a full range of different research tools as long as they ‘resonate with children’s own concerns and routines’ (Christensen and James, 2000: 7). Scott (2000), for example, in refuting past thinking, argues that children are able to engage with structured questions and that the reliability of their responses will be increased the closer the questions relate to their lives. A questionnaire, therefore, has potential.

In terms of questionnaires for adults, there are three traditional types: self-completion, face-to-face and postal (May, 1997). Clearly the difficulty of designing research for children between nine and eleven years does not only test the researchers ability to relate the questions to their everyday lives but, in a quantitative context, to ensure that the way in which the questions are asked is clear, manageable and unambiguous. As Scott (2000) rightly points out, literacy is a key factor when dealing with children, particularly as in any group of children there will be mixed abilities. This, therefore, might seem to limit the use of questionnaires with children. However, if concerns over literacy are taken into account in relation to self- completion questionnaires and these are then merged with the idea of face-to-face questionnaires, which provide for some dialogue between the researcher and participant, then suitable questionnaires can still be developed.

As has been mentioned, it is important for research with children to be conducted in a way that is not alien to their day-to-day routine (Christensen and James, 2000). For many children, story-telling plays some part in their lives, whether it is watching films or TV, reading books or listening to a story. Listening to stories and hearing information presented in this way is, therefore, something they are used to and for many, it is something they enjoy. So in order to present them with the material on which the questions would be based, it was decided that the children would be asked to listen to an especially designed and made recording, which was scripted in such a way as to engage, explain and equip the children with the information that they would need to answer the questions.
The recording consisted of a scripted programme in which the hosts took the children from one question to the next, introducing new characters along the way. This was played to the children in their classes, which meant that twenty five to thirty children would hear the recording at one time and whilst listening to it, they were invited to fill in the questionnaire. As May (1997) points out, a lack of interest is often the reason why questionnaires are poorly completed or not completed at all, so the idea behind ensuring a fun-story board was that it would maintain the interest and attention of all the children, bearing in mind different abilities. Also, because children are generally used to taking in information in this format, it meant that it was possible to provide them with a large amount of information on which a good number of questions could be asked, within a restricted time period. This is how the recording started.

Studio Presenter: Hello and welcome to SWF Research Live, I hope you’re all feeling well and ready to use those little grey cells. Well today we have some stories for you to listen to and some interesting people for you to meet. But before we get started I am sending you over to the University for some final reminders, and I think Sam is there waiting for us.

Sam: Yes, thanks Jim, I’m here standing just inside Sheffield University with lots of students walking past me …

Passing student: Hi … am I on the radio?! I just want to say “Hi” …(microphone pulled away)

Sam: Thank you – we are trying to conduct a serious piece of research radio here. Anyway, as I was saying, I am here at Sheffield University and I have a few things to remind you about before you get going. And here to help me is my supervisor … thank you for joining me.

Supervisor: My pleasure.

Sam: Now before we start the research it is important to stress that this is not a test.

Supervisor: Yes that’s right. For all these questions there is no right or wrong answers, we just want to know what that person thinks.

Sam: Okay, so it’s that person’s ideas that matter?

Supervisor: Yes

Sam: Is there anything else they should know?
Supervisor: It is important everyone understands what they are being asked to do, and if someone doesn’t understand, they need to put their hand up.

Sam: Okay, you lot out there – remember to let us know if you don’t understand what you need to do … just put your hand up.

Supervisor: And other than that, just listen carefully and enjoy it.

Sam: Okay thanks, that’s it from us in Sheffield and I think we are ready to start. So now over to your guides for the day – Henry and Catherine.

Having different voices and energy within the script did engage the children, as did the characterisation and story line that went through it. The script also provided a means to guide the children through the questionnaire. For example, the questionnaire itself was designed so that any instructions were not given by me standing in front of the class, but were given by the characters on the tape that were hosting the ‘radio programme’, as shown in this extract from the recording:

Host 1 – Catherine: So let’s get going. You need a pencil and your answer sheet. All got that? Right now turn to section 1. You are going to hear some stories - don’t worry about who is saying them as the stories are just made up, just listen to what they have to say.

After hearing the story you need to look at your answer sheet. There are 3 questions, a, b and c. A) asks you to judge the act. Let us know whether you think the act was right, wrong or, if you think it depends on other things, then circle ‘it depends’.

Now you only have to answer part B if you judge the act to be wrong. You then need to let us know how wrong that act was. One is not very wrong and five is very, very wrong. Circle whichever one you think it is. Then it’s part C. Here you need to let us know whether you would do this act; you have four choices - no way, maybe, probably and yes – and you just circle one of these.

Host 2 - Henry: All got that? Any problems then put up your hand now.

Using the characters to direct the children as to what they were supposed to be doing, and asking them to put their hands up if there were any problems, allowed me to take on a supportive rather than dictatorial role, protecting the rapport I was building up with the
children and limiting any perceptions of greater power the children might associate with me. Following the introductions, the two 'hosts' then took the children through the questionnaire. After each part of a question, there was an opportunity for the tape to be paused while the children wrote their answers, with the children being asked to put their hands up when they were ready to move on.

Even though the recording provided a format for conveying the information about which the questions were to be asked, a means of recording that information was also required; therefore, a response booklet was prepared (elements of this are illustrated in following sections). For a previous piece of research, I had developed a booklet with reference to the answer papers that the children had used for their Key Stage 2 SATS exams (SATS are national attainment tests taken by children in England and Wales at different stages of their school career; Key Stage 2 tests are taken at the end of year 6, when most children will be eleven years old). For example, the SATS listening paper, which combined free writing with multiple-choice answers, had provided a useful model on which to structure a questionnaire with a style of answering that the children were used to. For this SATS paper, the children had forty-five minutes to answer twenty questions.

The time scale reflected the amount of time that I had identified for this part of the research; however, I wanted to ask more than twenty questions. By means of refining the way in which the children were presented with the information and providing a standard set of responses, whether multiple-choice or free writing, my questionnaire asked fifty-eight questions in a similar amount of time. Forty-eight of the questions were multiple-choice and ten were free writing; this is explored further below. The design of the booklet, with pictures, different type fonts and layout, was such that it marked it out from being associated with the SATS exam papers and, as can be seen below, there were no difficulties with engaging the children to the extent that they fully completed the questions they were asked.

Section 1 – are these actions right or wrong?
The Questionnaire was divided into three sections, the first of which allowed me to ask about whether certain acts were right or wrong and the extent to which the children saw these actions as ‘serious’. By grouping all the questions within the categories of ‘taking something’, ‘hurting others’, ‘fooling around’ and ‘lying’, I was able to ask questions that explored whether particular circumstances affect the moral definition the children attached
to an action. For example, this is how the children were questioned in relation to ‘lying’ in a further extract from the script for the recording.

Host 2 - Henry: Now for question four, and for this we have a new character Charlie. Now remember, don’t worry about what you think of Charlie – remember it is the act, not the person, you need to judge. Charlie is going to give some examples of lying. So listen carefully for question four.

Charlie: I had been out all day trying to find my mum a birthday present. She is really fussy and it took absolutely ages but at last I found what I was after; it was one of these silk scarf things. Anyway, I was bringing it home and my mum saw me carrying something. She asked me what I was holding; I said nothing and she said, look, I can see it, and I said oh it’s just something that I had brought home from school.

Host 2 - Henry: [Takes children through the answer options]

Charlie: There was one time when I was going to the cinema. I was with some of my friends outside and the cool gang from school appeared. Some of them are quite friendly, but they like you to be like them, you know, those kind of people. They were all smoking and one of them said to me – do you smoke? I had never smoked before and I never intend to smoke, but I thought it would look bad if I said no, so I said yeah, I smoke.

Host 2 - Henry: [Takes children through answer options]

Charlie: On this same trip to the cinema, the cool gang had disappeared and I had now thrown my cigarette into the bin. My friends and I were not sure what we wanted to see. There was this one film that was a 12 and I was only 10 at the time. But I really wanted to see it, so I asked for my ticket; the man said how old are you, and I said I was 12, two months ago.

For each of the questions in the four categories the children were presented with a recurring set of potential answers, for which they had to circle what they felt was the most applicable response. The options were:

- **Was this action**
  - Right
  - Wrong
b) If you think the action is wrong – HOW wrong is it?

Not Very Wrong  Very Very Wrong

1  2  3  4  5

Maintaining a common set of responses made it easy for the children to understand what was being asked of them, as well as providing a clear means through which to help codify and sort the data, which helped with analysing the different answers.

These findings were considered in the context of an earlier questionnaire that the children had been asked to complete. A Personal Fact File had been designed to ask for more personal information about the children, as well as questions aimed at furthering the level of analysis from their answers to the main questionnaire itself. At an initial meeting with the children, therefore, they had been invited to self-complete this three-sided form that asked questions about their age, who lived at home, what the main rules were in different social spaces, as well as specific questions about whether ‘is it always wrong to: steal, fool around, lie or hurt others’ and why.

The result of combining these responses with their answers to the first section of the Questionnaire showed that children’s moral opinions were not firmly fixed, but flexible. For example, thirty-five children said that ‘hurting others’ was always wrong (data from the Personal Fact File). However when presented with a specific scenario of helping a friend in the playground (on the recording), only nine children maintained their original position. Across the four categories, the morality of an action, its seriousness, and whether the children would do it, would ‘depend’. Significantly, the process of considering these different factors saw children draw on their social understanding and experience in shaping their positions. For example, the extent to which ‘taking something’ was seen as right or wrong was affected by considerations about relationships and social interaction, leading to questions about ownership and giving permission. The centrality of social considerations in the responses that the children gave was repeated across the other
actions (lying, hurting others and fooling around). It was clear that in framing their opinions, the children did not simply draw on a fixed list of moral definitions; they drew also on their experiences as social agents, reviewing actions and shaping meaning in the context of the world around them.

Section 2 - stereotypes

However, in addition to these questions, Section 2 of the Questionnaire was used to explore any stereotypes that the children associated with different moral behaviour. For example, the children heard this extract acted out on the recording.

Host 2 - Henry: Okay, I am now with our next guest for question 15 …

Mary: Yes I’m Mary Lions - I am married and have three children. My children seem to take up most of my time. My day starts when I wake them up and then it’s getting them out of the house and off to school. After that, I spend a while tidying up all the mess that is left and trying to get the house ship-shape. It is surprising how long things like ironing and washing take. Some days I will go and do some shopping to make sure the children have something tasty for tea. And all to quickly it’s the end of the school day, so off I go to pick them up. And that’s me I suppose. Another biscuit?

The children asked to respond, using the following questions, in relation to five different characters.

a) What do you think this person looks like?

b) Do you think this person has a good sense of right and wrong?

Yes No Don’t know

c) Why do you think this?

........................................................................................................
These answers, therefore, sought to combine multiple-choice questions with an element of free writing. Again, the questions were repeated for each character, reducing the potential for the children to misinterpret what was being asked of them. The addition of a free-writing question provided some more detailed data, which even though it could not be coded quite as simply as the multiple-choice answers, helped to paint a broader picture of certain aspects of the way children experienced morality in their everyday lives. By asking these questions, I was able to start creating a picture of the way in which children used stereotypes to order and frame their understanding; significantly these findings reflected a moral dimension.

In the case of Mary mentioned above, the children described her in the following way.

Mary is quite old (about middle aged) with blonde hair. She is small and has green eyes. She is neat and tidy and wears old-fashioned clothes and is always caring for others.

This description is based on an amalgam of the most frequently occurring comments that the children made and must obviously be seen in the context of the stereotypes that were suggested within the recording; however, what was really interesting was the association between the way someone was perceived and the moral attributes that the children associated with them. In Mary’s case, her age, gender and unthreatening appearance made her more likely to be seen as someone who was caring and had a good sense of right and wrong. This is a simplified analysis of this character; however, the research allowed for specific and more detailed consideration to be given to perceptions of age, gender, body shape, the way the body was styled and how it performed, in the context of the association between the way someone is seen and the moral understanding attributed to them.

Section 3
The third section of the questionnaire continued the focus on stereotypes, asking the children to read some newspaper headlines and then circle which of the characters this might refer to. For example:

**Read the headline - who might it refer to?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fighting in town causes lots of damage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Lions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guy Holston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By relating the headlines to bullies, victims, helpers, liars and cheats, it helped to explore further the perceptions that the children had of the characters, building on the descriptions they had given in Section 2. All these data proved very useful in considering the way in which the children saw others and how they attached to this a moral context through which they made some sense of the social world. In this example, Mick was the character who the children undisputedly saw as being the most likely to be fighting in town. Mick was also the character believed to have the worst sense of right and wrong; significantly, he was characterised as a teenager, with an earring, baggy clothes and sunglasses, who was lazy and messy.

Both the Personal Fact File and the Questionnaire allowed me to ask questions on morality that led to considerations of the fixed or flexible way that children apply moral meanings, the way they use stereotypes in ordering moral understanding, as well as further questions about self-identity and issues of similarity and difference. All the children who heard the recording were able to complete the questionnaire (everyone also completed the Personal Fact File). Two children, out of the eighty-four that took part in the questionnaire, needed teacher assistance to complete the questionnaire and four children needed guidance in relation to the character descriptions. With the younger class, time problems meant that the children had to listen to the tape in two hearings. However, this did not seem to affect their responses and was one of the benefits of using a tape recording.

**Drama Discussion Groups**
In addition to the data obtained through the questionnaires, the research also sought to explore more deeply the individual feelings, thoughts and impressions that each child had about aspects of the moral world in which they lived. Focus groups or, as defined here, discussion groups, are a useful tool in helping to get more qualitative information from children (Hill et al, 1996) and they also allow the researcher to concentrate 'on a defined area of interest in a permissive, not threatening environment' (Krueger, 1994: 6). The other major advantage of discussion groups is that they provide opportunities for the children to develop further the positions touched on in any written responses, which can be one-dimensional.

Harden et al (2000) make a clear case for the importance of task-centred activities as part of research and information-gathering with children. In order to focus the discussion groups, and as a means of investigating further the children’s perceptions of the issues, the group work was based around a piece of drama. Each class was divided into five groups, the most effective groups being made up of five or six children (Hill et al, 1996). Each group was given one of the following story lines:

1) You are with a friend and they want you to do something that is wrong. What happens next?
2) A person is picked on by another person. What happens next?
3) Someone does something very wrong at home; they get caught. What happens next?
4) Someone does something very wrong out and about; they get caught. What happens next?
5) You are asked to teach some adults right and wrong. What happens next?

From this, the children would enter into a discussion for around ten to fifteen minutes, leaving a further ten minutes (which was extended when possible) for them to put a play together. For each story line I had prepared some very broad questions, through which to structure and guide the discussions. The questions encouraged the children to think about who might be involved in these situations; where the drama might be taking place; what kind of acts could be involved; and why they were right or wrong. All this allowed further investigation of themes already explored in the Questionnaire and Personal Fact Files but in a way that, this time, directly related to the personal experiences of the children. For
example, one group, in looking at story line five, entered into a discussion about fairness and the way they felt they were treated whilst at school.

Liam And like, um, like, they’re coming up and teaching these all mighty sums, they’re huge sums for goodness sake, we are only kids.
SF So…
(A lot of noise)
Alex [the work] should be a bit more for our age groups.
Tim They say that they learnt this in secondary school and they then give it to us.
Alex Yeah
Amy In some work they say you’re doing this on your own. But some of the work we don’t understand. They are quite annoyed when you have done about a line or something, but we didn’t understand it.

Their drama built on this, with the children acting out sketches that showed teachers acting in an arbitrary way, at which point the characters, who were the children and thus the recipients of these ‘unjust’ acts, would freeze the drama and then question the teachers about their actions, challenging the fairness of their approach. From this, data were obtained that not only identified children’s personal thoughts and feelings but also, through the drama, showed their perceptions of others and how, in this case, issues of fairness were experienced in their everyday lives at school.

Each group had been told that they were to act out their drama in front of their classmates as a means of checking and investigating further the themes that their group had identified. Detailed discussion of each piece of drama was time consuming, however, although the importance of using other children as a means of validating the views expressed within these sessions was useful; however, if time is an issue, a couple of dramas could form the basis of a class discussion. Alternatively, the drama exercise could be approached more freely, without the constraint of the children being expected to perform their sketch. More unstructured role-play could then form the basis of further discussion within that group. This material was video-recorded, not as a means of analysing the micro aspects of the interaction between the children, but in order to provide a record of the way in which words were accompanied by actions.
Interviews and a Diary

Both the methods above allowed an opportunity to engage with children in a way that resonated with their own 'concerns and routines' (Christensen and James, 2000: 7) and they involved everyone in the three classes that I worked with. However, I was also interested in doing some work with relevant adults, so the children were invited to become involved in an additional part of the research, which would include an interview at home with their parents. Those involved in this part of the research would be interviewed with a friend at school and, following the visit to their family, they would also be asked to fill out a diary.

Plans were in place to select children purposively in the event of numbers for this section being too great, although this was never an issue. Sixteen children expressed an interest in being involved in this additional aspect of the research so, along with a friend, they took part in a semi-structured interview that sought to explore their own experiences of issues around right and wrong and self-identity, the group being divided in such a way that each half looked at a different theme. Out of the initial sixteen, however, I only ended up visiting seven families. The limited uptake may have been a result of running this aspect of the research at the end of the school year, as well as problems that arose by using teachers as an initial go-between. However, these seven children were also asked to complete a diary.

All the work I had done with the children had the constant variable that I, or one of their peers, was present. Even though I took steps to minimize the power differential and the risk that children would just tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, my access into their world remained an event, rather than a continuous and everyday occurrence. Consequently, I was keen to invite some of the children to complete a simple diary. The diary was for five days and for each of the days the children were asked to respond to eight questions. These were:

a) Have you done anything today which was wrong?
b) Have you done anything good today?
c) Have you seen anyone else do anything wrong today?
d) Did you learn anything about right and wrong today?
Answering ‘yes’ to any of these questions would then lead the child on to another set of questions, which gave them the opportunity to provide some details.

**Have you done anything today, which was wrong?**

YES or NO

a) What was it?

b) How do you know it was wrong?

c) Why did you do it?

d) What happened to you?

e) Will you do it again?

The children were given the choice of either writing the diary on a template or making an audio recording. If they chose the latter, they simply read out the questions and then spoke their answer onto the tape. Even though only a small number of children took part in this, the results, particularly in relation to the audio recordings, were informative. It was interesting to note the events that they choose to speak about and it was clear that they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts in this way, indicating a sense of freedom that saw the children offer information that was not so readily shared in other areas of the research. An example came when a participant, in discussing whether they had seen anything wrong during the day, shared an account of how one of his classmates had sung a racist rhyme. Not only would there have been considerable pressure on the participant not to have disclosed this information at school in front of his peers, for fear of it getting back to the ‘offender’, but talking and discussing such things within school, particularly in front of an adult would have been hard. The diary allowed this participant to provide a full and frank description of what had happened and what he thought about it, which was aided by his being able to record his words rather than having to write them down. The diaries also provided another picture of the children’s everyday lives and, combined with the other methods, added a further insight into their moral worlds.

**Validity of approach**

As commented earlier, there have been concerns in the past over the way in which children have been regarded in the context of research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000) but, by engaging with them through methods that respect the context within which they live
their lives, children can be provided with a forum to share their experiences and allow us as adults a glimpse of the way in which they understand the social world. The research discussed in this article sought to reinforce the validity of the children’s input in two ways: first, through consistent and clear methods, routinely contrasted with one another in shaping any findings; and second, in providing a supportive and safe research environment.

Each of the methods discussed above was designed to tap into the everyday experiences of the children. Using a recording for the Questionnaire ensured that the questions were presented in exactly the same way. Set templates were also prepared and used for the discussion groups, interviews and the diaries. Whilst it is obvious that individual experiences differ, the fact that, with these methods, all the children were able to get involved in a focused way in each aspect of the research tends to reinforce the value of the tools that were used. Comparing and contrasting data from the various methods and ensuring the children were questioned in a known environment (Greig and Taylor, 1999; Mayall, 2002; Scott, 2000), in the company of others that they knew, provided further confidence in the genuineness of their responses. This could be seen, for example, during the discussions and interviews, when having other children around provided an interesting and valuable check; questionable comments or statements made by a child might be challenged, leading to clarification or withdrawal. Significantly, having friends around also gave the children confidence to share their experiences.

Such experience also reinforces Mayall’s call for researchers to create a ‘supportive research environment, which gives children space and time to reflect on and discuss issues, with each other and with adults’ (Mayall, 1999: 15). In this research, this did not only mean considering the space within which the research was conducted but also the framework of the research as a whole. By establishing a clear ethical framework, based on Alderson’s (1995) work for Barnardos, focus was placed on seeing and treating children as invited participants in the research rather than people who were simply told to take part.

Consent was sought through a face-to-face meeting with the children, supported by leaflets for them and their parents. The leaflets specifically addressed concerns that people might have had over the nature of the subject matter, seeking to reassure both adults and children that this was not a test but merely an investigation of their thoughts. They also explained what was going to happen to the data collected, how it was going to
be stored and what it was going to be used for, as well as explaining what would happen if a serious disclosure, such as a child protection issue, was made. Each aspect of the research was explained, along with the methods that were to be used. Inviting the children’s involvement offered them an element of ownership in the research, which may go some way to explaining the quality and quantity of the data I received; even though I did not work with as many children and their families outside school as originally planned, the material obtained at the school was far greater than expected. The research also demonstrated the extent to which informed participation can result in children sharing openly their thoughts and feelings about issues that affect their everyday lives.

**Conclusion**

What this article demonstrates is that there is no need for children to be excluded from research in general, or specifically within discourses around morality. Rather, children need to be acknowledged as competent research participants who have the potential to provide valid viewpoints which, if listened to, can help develop our adult understanding of the way in which they live their lives. In order for this to be done, researchers need to respond to children in such a way that allows their research methods and instruments to reflect the practices that children are familiar with. It is, therefore, important that researchers are prepared to be creative in the way in which they develop their research. The fact that research with children is still to some extent a ‘new frontier’ means that a reflexive approach is required. Not only does this encourage the researcher to question the position from which they approach the participants (Davis et al, 2000), it also demands careful consideration of the methods that are used.

Children need to be seen as social agents, who draw and develop meaning based on their own social experiences. Without this move to engage children in the context of the social world they inhabit, policy and practice will remain based on generalisations, clouded by adult perceptions of childhood (Mayall, 2002; Oakley, 1994). As the data from this research began to emerge, so it became clear that children were actively engaged in developing moral meanings through which to make sense of the world around them. In practice, their moral definitions were not fixed, as the criminal law seems to expect, but dependent on many variables. Significantly, this does not point to children being morally incompetent: on the contrary, it shows the skill of children as social agents in drawing on and managing the complexity of their experiences and understanding in shaping meanings. It is only by continuing to explore children within this context that ‘actual
knowledge’ of children’s childhoods can be obtained, thereby providing a solid foundation on which to develop policy and practice around such important issues as morality.

References


