INFORMED CONSENT

Positioning families as co-researchers at the museum: How do we see and hear the voices of parents and children?

Background context:

Positioning young children as co-researchers seeks to elevate their voice, interests and power in research processes. However, there are added tensions when co-researching with babies and very young children, particularly in public spaces, where young children's movement, interactions and experiences can be shaped by adult caregivers, the wider public, and indeed the space itself.

These tensions were forefront in the Family Welcome Project, a practitioner research project (Wall, 2018) that aimed to understand the relationships that the youngest visitors to museums build with museum collections and spaces. The research took place in the Fitzwilliam Museum, which holds the art and antiquities collection of the University of Cambridge, UK. The Museum was founded in 1816 and opened to the public in its current site in 1848. Admission is free, and it hosts a wide range of learning programmes, including specialist early years activities, which have been running for over fifteen years.

The Family Welcome Project grew out of previous work exploring the potential of the Museum to create a nurturing space (Wallis & Noble, 2023) in which children and families could experience a sense of belonging and ownership (Wallis & Noble, 2022). Aware that previous projects, and in particular, data collection, had been very much planned and shaped in advance by the research team, we were keen to explore more collaborative ways of building a data set. Embracing the tensions around co-researching with very young children in public spaces, we opted to position families as co-researchers and bring into focus the interplay of voice and power between children and caregivers.

Existing literature around the experiences of young children and families in museums is not representative of the general population. Global North contexts predominate (Shaffer, 2020; Massarani et al., 2021; Terreni, 2015; Wu & Wall, 2017) and participants, similarly to museum visitors in general, are more likely to be drawn from white, highly-educated, affluent, and non-disabled groups than we would expect from a representative sample (Ásványi et al., 2021; Eardley et al., 2018; Erdman et al., 2022; Hamer, 2019; Taylor & Kervin, 2022). When conceiving

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the Family Welcome Project we were keen to challenge this, and offer the experience of being Family Welcome Ambassadors as widely as possible.

For this reason, we worked in partnership with a local Child and Family Centre supporting a wide range of families, including those facing disadvantage, to recruit our co-researchers. Fifteen families were involved in the project. This included mothers, fathers, and children aged between four months and two and a half years old from a range of backgrounds. Over a period of five months, we arranged group visits to the Museum during which families captured their experiences through photographs (using children's cameras), scrapbook entries and reflections with the staff. Together we sought to unpick elements of the museum experiences that facilitated a sense of welcome for families with young children, and to explore directions for developing better practice in future.

The ethical challenge:

A key ethical challenge for us was what it means to position a 'family' as co-researcher. While there are many interesting discussions around participatory research methods with children (Clark, 2010; Drury & Ruckart, 2023; Montreuil et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Sevón et al., 2023; Tzibazi, 2013) and in involving parents (Formosinho & Passos, 2019; Tazi et al., 2015) alongside them, what was a challenge in our project was trying to understand the interplay between the experiences of the family group, and of the individuals within each family.

With such young participants (more than half the children in our study were aged under 12 months), we were keen to recognise and celebrate the shared experience and interdependency of the adult-child dyad. As our project was focusing on the notion of a 'Family Welcome', it was important to some extent to consider the family as a unit, rather than focus in on the needs of individuals separately. By reflecting on shared experiences, we were also aiming to find a way of speaking about museum provision that did not privilege one group over another according to age; to recognise the importance of an environment that is simultaneously stimulating and nurturing to adults and children. By concentrating on the shared needs, hopes, and comfort of all our co-researchers we hoped to create an equitable basis for inquiry that did not set children and adults in juxtaposition.

However, we were fully aware that our research fits within a broader social context in which unequal structures tend to privilege the voices of adults over children, and the voices of the privileged over the marginalised. We questioned whether in seeking to capture a 'family' perspective, we were in fact simply enabling the

voice of parents to speak on behalf of their children. This was particularly pertinent for the baby participants who were pre-verbal, and reliant on adults to help them move around the galleries. Some of the data collection methods we had available for families (the use of children's cameras, drawing, selecting of images for inclusion in a scrapbook), while potentially empowering for toddlers, were not appropriate for the younger babies.

We wanted to understand how to listen to the babies' perspectives – acknowledging the crucial role of the parents in shaping these while still respecting and realising the babies' rights to participation on their own terms.

Parent and child interacting with artwork on display at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK during the Family Welcome Research Project.[1]

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[1] The use of visual methods in this study, such as photographs, aligned to the researchers' theoretical assumption that children communicate multimodally - children's facial expressions and physical positioning are an aspect of their 'voice'. However, sharing such images on the ERIC platform requires a further layer of consent and amplifies tensions around whose voice takes precedence. The children were too young to fully comprehend or consent to the use of photos in publications or online, therefore photos are only shared where parents gave permission to do so. Although commonplace, there is ethical discomfort in relying on parental consent in this way. Yet, the case study authors also advocate for the 'visibility' of children in cultural spaces (like art museums) to help challenge pre-conceptions about who these spaces are for. Engaging deeply with the ethical tensions around consent is critical in acknowledging young children's presence in these spaces and their right to be there.

Choices made:

Crucial to our ethical decision making was the explicit intention to listen actively to all participants, and for all choices to be made freely. This could lead to instances of friction if members of the same family expressed different preferences. When discussing the project with parents, we spoke directly about this tension. Embodying their responsibilities as co-researchers, as well as advocates for their children, parents quickly understood this dilemma and worked alongside us in our thinking, balancing their own interests with careful observation of their children.

We took the following steps to enable the perspectives of the 'family' to be understood alongside those of individuals:

- Triangulation of data

While parents worked to capture key elements of their experiences through photographs (this was also an important way for older toddlers to communicate their experiences) and reflections in their journals, Museum staff also carried out participant observations potentially noticing different aspects of a moment of encounter. While neither the parent nor the staff interpretation of the child's response would be neutral, or free of bias and expectation, having multiple lenses brings the child's experience into focus rather than leaving it invisible it behind the narrative of a single adult.

- Use of photographs

In addition to photographs taken by families, the museum staff also captured (with consent of parents) images of children and families in the galleries. These served as key stimuli for ongoing reflections and shaped our understanding of how children were using their bodies and facial expressions in the galleries. For babies and young children, eye gaze and positioning of the head (particularly when being carried in a sling) are important modes of communication that are both relational and show independence. In documenting these we hoped to honour the decision making and physical experiences of the babies' embodied "voices".

- Adopting a stance of enquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009)

Crucially, by configuring this project as research, we were able to start from a point of curiosity and not knowing. Our methodology of 'living' a family welcome through documented museum visits rather than working with families through consultation methods, such as focus groups, emphasised fresh perspectives and the challenging of assumptions. This was the case for the staff in the research

team, but also for the parents researching with their babies and young children. While they saw themselves as experts due to knowing their children better than anyone else, the unique context of the museum environment meant that they were able to remain curious about how their children would respond. This was crucial to addressing the central dilemma of how parents are able to understand and document the experience of the family group, without subsuming the child's responses into their own experiences and expectations.

The museum setting encourages close looking and paying careful attention in order to make the most of the exhibits. In our research, we aimed to extend the focus of this careful attention to the young children taking part in the project so that their ideas and responses were recognised and acted upon. Our fieldnotes show examples of how the researcher mindset, combined with an unhurried (Clark, 2022) attention to babies' and children's voices, enabled parents to listen effectively to their children. For example, one parent explained that she had begun a visit by looking for artworks showing faces as she thought these would be engaging for her child, but by watching her daughter's reactions closely she realised that what was actually catching her attention were the real human beings in the galleries - the staff members and other visitors. This enabled ongoing conversations about recognising the value that children ascribe to the 'everyday' elements of the museum environment (other people, floorboards, door latches and so on), and positioning these equally within our research narratives alongside engagement with the artworks on display.

Another instance of the impact of listening to the child's voice was a baby who positioned himself in a doorway between two galleries. His mother's first response was to consider moving him 'out of the way' of other visitors. However, the context of the research helped slow her initial reaction and she instead observed the situation, reflecting on her son's seemingly deliberate positioning to enable maximum interaction with passers-by, who all expressed delight to see him there.

Reflexive questions / considerations:

The examples above describe situations in which there is a tension between adults and children's thinking, interests, expectations and ways of seeing the world. When we are researching with family groups, it is essential to recognise this but also acknowledge the interconnectedness of the relationship and how this impacts voice and consent. We therefore want to consider how we can make room for individual voices and decision-making (particularly those of pre- or non-verbal children) within the context of family research.

- How do we reconcile the tensions between adult and child interests, experiences, expectations and ways of seeing the world?

- How do we decipher the voice of the child within the dependent/interdependent relationship of a parent and young child?

- What does the 'consent' of the young child mean in this context?

- What is the impact of the environment on whose voices are heard ?

- How else might we make room for individual voices?

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