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**‘Looked After’ Young People’s Voices**

**An Actor-Network Theory Analysis**

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**Abstract**

This article offers an empirical case study of ways in which ‘looked after’ young people responded in focus groups about taking part in a survey task. These research participants are deemed by the state as in need of protection. We demonstrate that despite their vulnerable status they are immensely resilient and capable of contributing to debates about research participation. Through the application of actor-network theory we outline conglomerations of actor-networks involved with the materiality of their agency.

**Keywords:** actor-network; survey; looked after children; research participation; voice

**Theoretical Context**

In our paper we convey an example of a small-scale actor network research study which concentrates on the elicitation and understanding of insider perspectives. Our theoretical critique is an original approach to studying a pervasive institutional research strategy: we analyse qualitative data gained from young people about their constructions regarding the nature and conduct of a new national survey. Our broad strategy accommodates a worldwide paradigm about childhood, and advocacy for young people’s participation in matters affecting them, resonant with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), and the new sociology of childhood’s emphasis on the child as agentic and as co-researchers (James and Prout, 1990; Raby, 2014).

Our study focuses on the networks of Looked After Children. Under the provision of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 ‘looked after children’ are defined as those in the care of the local authority; in July 2014 there were 15,580 looked after children in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2015). We pay attention to the ways in which human and nonhuman actors have moulded their often difficult personal histories, through actor-network theory. Their esteem, trust and sense of belonging all carry meanings which create their identity in the present and so are implicated in their responses to the world around them.

Actor-network theory (ANT) offers an innovative perspective on questions of social theory; it conceptualizes the social in counter-intuitive ways. The theory focuses upon the conditions, constraints and modifications of agency within networks and is situated in terms of post-structural or post-modernist anti-essentialist materialist orthodoxy. Ontologically ‘the human’, ‘culture’, ‘mentality’, ‘research’, ‘voice’, are conceptualized with ‘the nonhuman’, the physical world, things, places, documents, questionnaires, as opposed to sitting conceptually distinct from them as they logically do in the modernist paradigm.

Foucault (1975), in the process of uncovering the historical conditions of the European Enlightenment, deconstructs Modernity’s fulsome dichotomy of the ‘human’ from the ‘nonhuman’ (Latour, 1993). ANT’s engaged materialist focus on the complex constructed textures of reality prompted the choice of ethnographic qualitative methodologies common to research affiliated with ANT to tap the ways in which ‘the human’ is embedded in the ‘nonhuman’ without adopting *a priori* assumptions. ANT was born from post-structuralism applied to the sociology of science (Latour, 1987) and the socio-cultural history of technology including medical science (Latour, 1988). The theory’s ontological generosity affords methodological insights and examines the voices of research participants building upon a rights-based perspective (Clark et al, 2014; Lundy et al, 2011). ANT affords distinctive critical probing of human actor networks in their own right: memories, ideas, perspectives, feelings circulate and impact agency. Latour (1987) recommends the researcher follows actor’s networks to surface these entities and their associations. As Gadd (2015: 3) argues “a memory of maltreatment may remain in a child’s mind whether desired or not. Therefore, memory takes on an agency that is disconnected from a child’s will…”.

Adult-centric assumptions about children and childhood are necessarily challenged by the anti-essentialist ontology of ANT. The logic of ANT is that the social only comes into existence through particular combinations of actors in networks. The task of the ethnographer is to unravel and map the socio-cultural geography of networks. Positivism, in its privileging of networks of neutrality, claims objectivity and universal scientific generalisability. We deploy ANT as a tool to facilitate deconstruction of research practices which, in this context, are characterized by asymmetrical power relations. According to ANT the activities of actors in networks are typically contested: actors exert power over others and try, using a strategy of ‘network engineering’, to mobilize them into their networks (Gadd, 2015; Hitchings, 2003). As Saldanha (2003: 4) observes ANT’s post-structural materialism is an empirical philosophy typically preferring ethnographic sources to demonstrate the process of knowledge construction.

ANT in summary then inclines to offer a comprehensive materialist project in philosophy, social science, human geography and social anthropology (Johansson, 2011). It dwells upon “the multifaceted interconnections of a local, egocentric network of an actor, before moving to the next connected bundle of entanglements…” (Mutzel, 2009: 876). In ANT ‘the social’ has to be discovered. It does not exist ontologically independent of the research process. Networks of actors produce ‘the social’; actors as agents, human and nonhuman, produce it through associations. In this paper, ANT accounts are conveyed through narrative as these afford the elucidation of how the social has been constructed through contingencies. Social theory is borne out of the analysis of networks (Latour, 1993). Here the focus falls on the assumptions and meanings actors introduce to material reality. Qualitative fieldwork is necessary to understand how actors themselves make connections. Actor-generated accounts enable the ANT researcher to map the socio-cultural geographies which emerge through careful dialogue with research participants.

***ANT and the Sociology of Childhood***

Prout’s (2011) seminal explication of the sociology of childhood’s recent history connects with the changing current of social science characterised through the radical break which ANT manifests from the epistemology and ontology of the European Enlightenment. Prout (2011) describes modernist sociology’s dichotomy between human and the nonhuman, structure and agency as incapable of capturing the fragmentation and mobility of contemporary social worlds. Instead it is recommended we attend to theorisation premised on ANT and other post-structural perspectives found in French Theory. Early versions of the new sociology of childhood presented it as fixed; children were conjured as passive within overarching structures like class and gender. Advancing on that paradigm was a different position - the post-fordist historical shift which James and Prout (1990, 1997) developed; here the classical sociological opposition of structure versus agency was replaced by a conception of childhood as locally contingent and structured by flows and networks as adumbrated in Latour’s (1993) ‘actor-network’ model. This model afforded recognition of the material and practices from which new phenomena are generated and emerge, and attention fell on the hybrid character of childhood governed through heterogeneous networks of the social with no *a priori* separation of them from the nonhuman. Materiality is implicated in data analysis associated with this conception, which must now focus on the nature of how things are enmeshed (Callon, 1986; Prout, 2011: 9).

In the prism of ANT, childhood becomes a collection of different and competing orderings, unseparated from the hierarchy of adulthood. Networks cut through these classical boundaries, producing connection and disconnection of young person and state. The networks these two phenomena mobilise are what produce their contingent distinctiveness, their differential authority and their power to exclude. As Prout (2011) argues, the adoption of this paradigm means a different research question becomes necessary: what are the networks through which a form of childhood or childhood experience is produced? The demise of traditional forms of child socialisation and of globally different childhoods justifies our focus on networks. Belonging with particular actor-networks has the corollary that the meaning of the concepts ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘care’ will vary between settings (Christensen et al 2000). In terms of the present study it therefore becomes pertinent to ask whether the ideology of a research-supported practice privileges or excludes particular childhoods, and to probe how positivism facilitates specific networks in an unequal system where the power and agency of dominant groups are reproduced and strengthened (Hart, 2013: 12).

Recent scholars whose empirical work has sought to utilise ANT to explore childhoods include Rautio (2013), Pyyry (2014) and Gadd (2015). Gadd’s (2015) ethnographic exploration of street children in Brazil focused on their experiences, beliefs and values connected with this form of community. She discovered within their networks the most potent actors were other street children, the police authorities, and nature in the form of trees where they found relative safety and protection. The agency of their precarious and dangerous lives was governed by the intensity of their network of protective actors whose enrolment in the networks reflected the contingently formed decisions of these children in response to the micro-politics governing local circumstances, reflecting their ultimate ambition for safety and security. Although Pyyry (2014) examines young people’s lives in a less risky environment she also pursues a form of street-life in terms of hanging out in urban spaces.

The data Pyyry (2014) produced was not, she argued, to be conceptualised as conventional scientific data premised on modernist dichotomies. Instead the photo-journeys and activities recognised non-human actors moulding the agency of human actors, the young persons whose learning to experience the familiar as unfamiliar took them on self-generated trips over urban geographies. Pyyry’s (2014: 2) conceptual language reflected ANT’s non-hierarchical construction of the human and nonhuman: “material learning” of the kind her investigation afforded caused re-conceptualisation of learning away from the notion of a classical solitary human being; non-human entities “also have a capacity to affect and take part in the learning event”. Agency is distributed and embraces diversity of actor types. Instead of classical “representational thinkers” she offers the idea of “enchantment” to denote what her socio-materialist ontology introduced into the social networks of young people, which prompted greater meaning being attached to ‘banal environments’ and heightened awareness of “everyday spatial politics” (p. 6). Her action-oriented study helped, she argued, new actor-networks to emerge through creative encounters with other things including commercial artefacts. On the journeys she helped originate new actors were introduced into their networks: the emotion of fear was encountered and contributed to fresh reflective states. Emotions had agency. As a research methodology her commitment to ANT allowed her to escape from the narrow ontology and epistemology connected with more traditional kinds of social science research.

Rautio (2013) also rejected categorisation of her data through a doctrine of positivism which, like Pyyry (2014), she implies would presuppose a modernist bifurcation of nature and culture. Rautio argues educational research seeks ontological closure and contains a neo-liberal politics where hegemonic mathematical practices are in the ascendency; measurement, standardisation and denial of openness characterise this network’s scientific orthodoxy within which serious critique is anathema (MacLure, 2006). Rautio probed the materiality of the everyday environment in the lives of children. The act of carrying stones exemplified the intimate interpenetration of the non-human with the human; she termed this kind of act an auto-telic practice. Humans are in nature, which helps constitute them; she claims “all other animate or non-animate co-existing entities” are represented within the network created through an apparently simple act of stone use (p. 394) which is repeatedly engaged with without seeming end, purpose or reward. She terms this type of thing ‘banal geography’, where the interaction of the non-human with human brings into play other material entities, a disposition that is particularly attributed to children who, she suggests, have tendencies to humanize their non-human contexts and objects. Childhood is then enmeshed within the resulting relational non-hierarchical networks where we present the-child-with-stones; agency is attributed to this encounter between stones and the child. Pyyry (2014: 397) describes this as “a congregational understanding of agency” where we become partially dependent upon the contingencies produced by interconnections of particular assemblages. The latter is political in its effects, as it excludes and privileges its own network as natural.

**Methodology**

The new sociology of childhood is constructed upon critical research processes, a fact that may be overlooked by positivist contemporary models of evidence based policy-making which may not connect with contemporary theorisations of childhood. In contrast to previous research, utilising ANT we directly analyse an un-theorized quantitative policy-led research process. We take account of the questions posed in a new national survey developed in the public sector. We examine the data collection process by attending to conceptions of the research rationale by looked after children whose ideas and actor-networks we celebrate. Our focus lies on challenging the normative modernist belief that quantitative surveys yield neutral and objective truths (Punch, 2003).

The young people in our sample participated in one of four focus groups, as part of a policy-driven research programme. The research was conducted by the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration, on the development of a subjective well-being survey about looked after children (Hanson and Henderson 2015). The work of the focus groups was to inform the design of the survey, aimed at children and young people across Scotland who are officially deemed either ‘looked after’ or have social service support to themselves and/or their family. This research practice illustrates a recent policy trend by governments to seek the voices of service users as part of a commitment to democratic values and human rights. The sample of nineteen young people participating in the focus groups experienced being looked after in residential or foster family settings. Their personal views were sought about survey questions and whether or not they are important or appropriate as a means to explore the concept of ‘well-being’. Table 1 shows the age and gender breakdown of this sample of nineteen research participants.

**TABLE 1 HERE**

The focus groups discussed in this paper are part of a wider research project being undertaken by the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA). SCRA plays a key role in Scotland’s care and protection and youth justice systems known as The Children’s Hearings System. Reporters within SCRA receive child referrals where there are welfare concerns about a child and it is felt that legally compulsory measures of protection may be needed. SCRA also conducts its own research and has prescribed legal obligations under the Children and Young Peoples (Scotland) Act 2014 to report on what they are doing to improve children’s outcomes in relation to their well-being. SCRA decided to re-design a subjective well-being survey, building on previous work conducted by the Children’s Society (Good Childhood Report 2014).

In this research, the survey questions used in the Good Childhood Reports (Children’s Society 2014) were discussed with four groups of young people with years of care experience in order to ascertain their views on the survey, and the appropriateness or ethical issues surrounding the survey questions. For example, an original question where children would rate on a Likert Scale how they felt about school raised discussion in the group as to whether children were attending school or education at all, and, if they were, as to how much they engaged with education. The SCRA survey thus added its own question, asking if the respondent took part in school or education. The word ‘education’ was included as this recognised that mainstream schooling was not the only route to learning for this group of young people.

**Thematic Findings**

Under the rubric of ANT assemblages our chosen themes delineate actor-networks which we argue afford insight into the research participants’ social world which we tap as we explore their views on a national survey. Law (2009: 141) states ANT ‘treats everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of webs of relations within which they are located.’ In this mould Wissink (2013: 4) asserts ‘actors and their interests do not exist apart from associations …research has to focus on this process of the production and acceptance of associations, which ANT calls “translation”.’ Latour (1993) coins the concept of ‘black boxes’ to designate the hidden circulation of actor-networks. For any mediator, agency is associated with the capacity to make other mediators act (Latour 2005: 71).

In this paper we present three actor-network thematic assemblies and present these themes through tables. Our data analysis seeks, by fine grained attention to evidence and ANT, to support an unravelling of the encounters in this socio-cultural locality.

***Assemblage: Existential Self***

**TABLE 2 HERE**

In Table 2 we deconstruct the entities generating the thematic assemblage (see evidential extracts below) that we have called Existential Self. Our rationale for this framing reflects the research participant’s existential mode of reasoning about participation. These participants are introducing new actors into the research context; actors judged to be authentic will be embraced. The participants are seeking to alter the assemblage of actor-networks presented by adults in the shape of the survey tool in ways that reflect their values, not those of officials (Johansson, 2011). In Table 2 the human actors are largely classified as being human emotions. These actors are critically important to whether the agency of the participants is actuated or withheld. The non-human actors in Table 2 are meant to indicate the technicalities associated with the research task. Unless, as the extracts below suggest, these material technical entities are annexed into the humanistic network of actors on the left hand side of Table 2 then, it is argued, that looked after children are disinclined to participate. Given that contingency, if they did complete this survey the results are bound to be impoverished, should the human actors that count in their lives be absent. As Pyyry (2014) argues “a congregational understanding of agency” documents the enmeshed nature of the human and non-human actors in this assemblage. Materiality pervades this understanding of the entities on the right hand classification of entities listed in Table 2. Following ANT these data are associated with the nature of how things are enmeshed and become agentive (Callon, 1986; Prout, 2011: 9).

It is well known that the relationship between service users and statutory sector workers is fundamental to their effective support and this is clearly true for children and young people (Gallagher et al 2012). A fundamental element of this professional relationship for young people is a bond of trust forged with their social worker (Winter 2009). Knowing this, the researcher asked in the focus group how significant it was that someone they personally *knew* asked them to take part in completing a survey as opposed to some stranger. Their responses revealed the following assemblage touching on attachment and ethics, and highlighting trust, familiarity and sense of belonging:

Better if it’s someone that you are comfortable talking to, maybe someone that I know. Like this, now I would fill one in with you, but before I wouldn’t have done it.

Trust colours their understanding of the survey task and preparedness to seek clarification:

Because they can give you more information about it as well. Because maybe if you didn’t understand something then there is somebody there to help you.

Some participants felt that the topic of research mattered more in terms of eliciting their participation than the question of which member of staff approached them to take part. For some their actor-network is skewed towards its relevance; the issue whether it is a survey or other research method appears less critical to their engagement:

It’s more like it would depend on the survey, more like the relevance. It depends on the survey that you are doing. Yeah and not like it depends on what the survey is about, like it would depend on if I had to talk about things, you know, there are obviously some things you don’t want to touch on, at the same time like, I say it’s for something good, if something can come out of the end of it then it doesn’t really matter because it’s like what for other people, so.

Aye and it depends on what the survey was on. If it was something important I would want to do it, but if it was something random then, because you are actually giving them information. If you give your opinion that is data.

For these two participants it was clearly felt that no matter who asked them to take part in a survey, the decision about getting involved would be dictated by their valorisation of the research topic more than the relationship with the ‘recruiter’. This was true even when it was someone they knew and trusted who had made the initial request. However, for others a relationship of trust does matter if he is to supply an authentic response to the survey’s intimate demands, as this extract illustrates:

I think it makes more sense to talk to someone because if you just give them a piece of paper and ask them to fill out stuff or just write yes no blah blah blah to get it over and done with, but if you talk to me and there has been that relationship then I am more likely to talk to you and tell you how I feel at that moment or what’s going on etc. but just writing it down and it depends on how you have explained it because I need to know what you are going to do with my life, with my story.

Apposite to this analysis is the question of how adulthood is constructed: Johansson (2011) reminds us it is normally constructed as the opposite of childhood, but in ANT adult subjectivities produce relations – this survey ‘represents’ adulthood – affecting the flow of ties between children and adults, and rather than dwell of children as ‘others’ these data ask us to envisage the adult centric perspective as problematic (Qvortrup, 2005; Prout, 2005). Significant issues for these participants within the actor-network of this survey were its relevancy, importance and sensitivity. They have to weigh up the prospect of discussing a difficult topic (as ‘looked after’ young people are often approached by professional workers to discuss their personal history) against the idea of contributing to something that could benefit others. Reasonableness is an important quality to some research participants in terms of how they feel they are treated and supported during undertaking the completion of a survey:

I think that what if you are expecting someone to take the time to sit down and sort of evaluate what you have been doing then yeah I should give them something but I think you’ll get people who will come and write rubbish anyway, you will get that whether you are paying them or not . I mean I have done that - like I feel like I have to complete this and then I will just tick whatever to get it over and done with, because some of them are extremely long and you don’t really want to sit there and read. It would make it easier if someone were to sit and explain to you this is what you are doing.

For some then, receiving a payment in recognition of time spent is fair and right. Even so, there are other matters that affect the success or failure of the positivist network. Taking part on a compulsory basis is likely to lead to disenfranchisement and even outright sabotage. However, bringing in a human element, someone who outlines the purpose of such a random undertaking can turn the matter around.

The hermeneutical character of the Existential Self Assemblage is reflected through particular oppositions: societal relevance over meaninglessness, sensitivity to personal worlds over distance, bonds of trust and intimacy over foreignness. This actor-network foregrounds emotions, relationality and connectedness. Gadd (2015) discovered within street children networks the most potent actors were other street children, the police authorities, and nature, in the form of trees where they found relative safety and protection. Undertaking any particular survey mattered less to the looked after children than did the ambience associated with the contingencies of this social geography, a finding resonating with Gadd’s (2015) identification of safety and protective actors. The precarious contingencies implicated in the lives of the Brazilian children and the Scottish looked after children illustrate the critical foregrounding of networks of care, protection and trust. The final extract describes the legacy of being in care on the participant’s outlook, and its implications for his attitude to survey question completion:

Yeah, I think as young person who has been in care it can take a long, long time to build up any trust or relationship with a person before you are able to open up and tell them anything. I don’t know many people who build up trust or relationships with a piece of paper, and just start writing, especially with some things, people will say things they experience.

His intelligence shines in the critical remark about the ludicrous idea of having a relationship “with a piece of paper.” Undertaking a survey is no different from expectations of treatment in general. Besides, he argues, what lies on that paper may be irrelevant to his own experience. The survey seems potentially alien, an intrusion into an existence that has boundaries he intelligently demarks and defends.

***Assemblage: Citizenship***

Prout (2005: 79-80) recommends we should “see whether and how different versions of child and adults emerge from the complex interplay, networking or orchestration of different, natural, discursive, collective and hybrid materials”. Examination of the next assemblage highlights further the covert ways in which a research task may carry ‘inscriptions’ prescribing what actors should do (Johansson, 2011: 105).

**TABLE 3 HERE**

In Table 3 are listed actors which we identified in our qualitative data. We classify the human actors in terms of emotions; as examined earlier the rights-based perspective recognises preventing harm and promoting mental wellbeing (Clark et al, 2014; Lundy et al, 2011). Latour (1987) recommends we follow actors’ networks to surface entities and associations. Gadd (2015: 3) endorses these proposals; “a memory of maltreatment may remain in a child’s mind whether desired or not. Therefore, memory takes on an agency that is disconnected from a child’s will…” The non-human actors in Table 3 are, as the extracts demonstrate, circulating in the networks that inform the agency of these young people, and combine with the intangible emotional actors in complex ways. According to one participant there are pragmatic reasons to demonstrate research participation:

Well we are all in secure, so you do it anyway just to do something, if you know what I mean. The one I did, you had a choice. You didn’t have to do it. But it was better than doing your work to be honest.

Although his interpretation of citizenship is strategic, he nevertheless recognizes choice. Despite being subject to the conditions of a secure setting the participant still manages to manifest impressive resilience, which is reflected in our decision to include the term ‘citizenship’ in our choice of assemblage. Research has shown that adults take part in survey research for a variety of reasons, often weighing up the perceived benefits of participation, such as financial incentives (Singer 2002) and relevance (Groves et al 2004). These young people would also undertake surveys if something could be gained in return. Many expressed this in terms of their own benefit but the idea of creating something good for others, usually in the future, was also a motivation indicative of a network embracing altruism. Kendrick et al (2008) raise the issue of whether some of the most vulnerable children in society, those who experience residential child care, should be approached to take part in research where they are unlikely to see any positive changes occurring in direct relation to themselves, and argues we must highlight the ethical imperative of clearly explaining its conventional scope. The following extracts are suggestive of a particular cultural interpretation around completing the well-being survey. A reference to “give you a row” implies a recognition of the authority at play within the research process, as this articulation illustrates:

I think that where you don’t tell people [they are getting a reward] and you get money or a voucher because it’s easy enough for people to do a survey they generally fill out the information anyway, so I would say to prevent people from just doing it purely because they are getting money, so you don’t tell them you are getting money and then when all the surveys are done you just send vouchers out to people that would be a nice surprise out in the post. At that point the survey is done anyway, so nobody is going to come back and give you a row.

This strategic argument addressing research participation suggests financial or other material incentives may undermine the integrity of responses to survey questions. Instead, reciprocity for efforts should fall after the survey is completed. Her mention of ‘a row’ shows her ability to empathise with a researcher, foreseeing that a lack of an expected payment can lead to conflict and may illustrate how a culture of care impacts on perceptions of tasks. But alongside that authority actor-network she also develops the perspective that rewards must follow survey completion, demonstrating her awareness of potential corruption. It is apparent that her reasoning draws upon ethical principles. In the following extract research participation is connected with achievement, well-being and a sense of positive principled citizenship:

I would do it for my own well-being, like if it would be good for me. It gives you a sense of pride as well, something, rather than just someone who sits and moans all the time that doesn’t ever put their words into actions. But if you give your opinion, like I’m actually an honest believer that the people who don’t vote in the election I don’t believe that they then have the right to go and moan if they’ve not taken the opportunity to vote because people died for that vote, so it’s the same thing, doing a survey you get something out of it because you have stood up and said something*.*

In this case a financial incentive was not enough where there was only a chance of winning a prize (due to the low odds), but where there was a greater relationship, in that the survey was a significant issue to him personally, or where social change could follow, then there was a greater buy-in:

When you fill out a survey that you could or couldn’t win something then the odds are that you are not going to win because there is like a million and one chance to actually win and its very rarely money, it’s usually vouchers for like Tesco or Asda. I don’t know many people who would take part in these stupid surveys that pop up on your computer yeah win £500 Tesco vouchers. But you would take part in something meaningful to you, but also something that you know maybe taking part in that survey could be making a difference in the long run.

This distinction between capitalist commerce and a socially valuable research survey resonates with a moral thread in his cultural understanding of research. ‘Stupid surveys’ are held in contempt. The financial rewards associated with the ‘capitalist survey’ are critically evaluated. Other participant’s views focus on the drawback of the survey methodology, especially those that are high in using repeated questions in order to obtain survey reliability:

One thing that puts people off when they ask like the same questions just worded slightly differently like just to see if people have put the same answers but it puts people off. I think that would be the make or break for young people; it’s how the questions are worded. You need to keep young people occupied and interested, if it’s the same thing over and over by the time you get to the third or fourth one they are thinking this is a waste of time.

He is not fooled by standardised survey techniques; the very design of the survey tool can render the survey “a waste of time”. Another participant’s critical reflections are influenced by his encounters in the prison system where he found inmates are not obliged to complete surveys:

They do surveys in the jail now but you don’t have to do them. Cos they post surveys in the jail all the time now like asking us about education, poverty and the jail and you could write it out and take it in the next day and they dispatch them. But it’s up to you every time, so I’ve had that experience so if I didn’t encounter anything in there I can’t imagine out here where you would *have* to do a survey.

It seems his preparedness to exercise good citizenship by participating in the survey task has been influenced by how he felt about them when he was in prison, and experience then affects the way in which he now conceptualises surveys. Throughout these extracts there are strong psycho-social forces colouring the interpretation of survey research and willingness to participate. Our general findings so far indicate that ‘technical skills’ are not critically implicated in the relationship of the research participants to the survey task. Instead deeper beliefs around the social and political environment colour the stance adopted to contributing to the research process. Jail, education, poverty, question wording, computer screens and supermarket vouchers form a conglomeration of entities which nudge us towards conceptualising a ‘dark side’ of the actor-networks implicated. Gadd (2015) foregrounded how maltreatment can thwart a child’s will to control the agency of the memory of it upon actions in the present. The meaning of this assemblage is endorsed by Prout’s (2011) argument that post-structural sociologies of childhood are particularly sensitive for explicating contemporary childhood. The next assemblage connects with conceptions these young people have of the social.

***Assemblage: Recognition***

**TABLE 4 HERE**

The actor-networks suggested in Table 4 conjure communication and its materiality in non-human entities through which agency is interconnected and recognised; the entity ‘petition’ denotes ties to the political sphere.

Ensuring research practices furnish credible data is a *sine qua non* of the study’s potential to achieve real world impact. This scientific truth ought to include proper recognition of the capabilities of the young persons as co-researchers: Amartya Sen’s (2009) capability approach to social justice requires us to create social environments where freedom is in fact available to ensure the necessary autonomy exists for the realisation of capabilities. Participation in ethical research praxis means recognising the praxis of these particular participants (Thomas, 2015). The next extract expresses reservations about the validity of surveys. The dichotomous survey questions misrepresent the fluid, mobile character of social life and a sense of identity and belonging with “young people”:

I think with young people it’s like what you are saying, your life is constantly changing so at the moment you are asking me a yes or no question I might not even have a yes at the time or a no, I’m kind of in the middle.

In the middle of what we would like answered here, in ANT the middle is the ground where human and non-human actors connect. In opposition to a realist ontology which is connected with positivism ANT obliges the researcher to unearth political forms of power whose authority lies in the silence achieved through convention and the logic of scientific standardization. The ANT researcher is compelled to treat the human subject as inextricably associated with physical, cultural, and political networks and their actors. She cannot recognise herself or envision her life as having a meaningful place within such a prescribed methodology of a ‘yes’ ‘no’ ontology. Another participant, appears to help us find a resolution of why others feel uncomfortable with the survey’s modernist dichotomous logic; she argues its power lies in gathering views from a variety of people and putting them together:

Aye because it’s not all gonna be the same is it, because people think differently, see things differently and it adds up.

In the next extract our participant wants adequate attention to be paid to their content by survey researchers and policy makers. The possibility of this is an attraction or barrier to them being completed; she expects the survey to change society in some way as a condition of her providing data*:*

Yeah like if they are paid attention to properly, if they are doing something that makes a change then, like they are asking people to fill out surveys for a reason then yeah if there is a good outcome at the end of it.

These young people are conveying recognition that survey research is potentially invaluable on condition not only is it strategic but also engages critically with their voices, recognises their social space. The institutionalisation of the participatory initiatives around UNCRC and the voice of young people which this paper explores Raby’s (2014: 77) scholarly reservation resonates with our participants, she argues these initiatives may bolster “a neoliberal economic and political context that prioritizes western individualism…while…fostering children’s deeper subjugation through self-governance.” Tensions are apparent: we hear the iteration of an actor-network of recognition whose elements include advocacy, improvement, direction, relatability and change; some participants are unconvinced surveys hold enough authority. As one young male argues direct action through contacting the political elite, “an MSP”, stands the greatest chance of impact, surveys may help bring that action to fruition:

Not really I think maybe you will get a better idea of what people think you might get something new but not what people really think, all you have got is data, it’s like what steps do you take to do something about this is the next step. If you want to get something properly done then speak to an MSP. In Scotland you only need one person to start a petition to get it heard in the Scottish parliament, but there could be survey behind the petition. So I suppose a survey could start off something to change something like the big picture but it takes other things to make a big impact… that’s all come from a survey in the past, but the vast majority of people don’t really do anything about it. It’s just a small percentage of people in society that actually carries things, will do it. So I think it only makes a very minor impact.

This insightful sociological analysis highlights elites and hierarchy. He expresses some alienation and disenfranchisement, democratic power is limited, “the vast majority of people” and that it’s “just a small percentage of people that actually carries things”. His analysis returns to the sense of being overlooked or not mattering in the political order, a theme engaging Raby’s (2014) contribution. However, there is still a potential through the human will, taking just one person to make the non-human petition to get the ball rolling. Disengagement of the majority is conveyed through the meaning of another observation about the minority:

Like if you had something in here on the table and at the end of the week you ask people if they actually read it will probably be one or two.

Our extracts conjure social and political worlds which ‘looked after’ young people bring to research participation. Research ethics is important to the ‘positions’ taken by the research participants, other scholars touch on ethics as a modality of social justice (Farrimond, 2013: 15-17). Tension in the realisation of authentic recognition through a participatory research agenda is evident from a Foucauldian position where governmental processes shape behaviour especially when we are ensnared through a seeming participation in governance through evidential knowledge. The young persons in this study were afforded opportunities to step back from this political agenda, a ‘soft’ tactic of control which our research approach sought to avoid, where they might otherwise be quietly socialised into the neo-liberal values of particular adult-centric networks (Raby, 2014: 81).

**Conclusion**

C. Wright Mills (2000: 56) holds in contempt ‘abstracted empiricism’ and its relationship with the ‘bureaucratic ethos’: focussing upon surveys conducted by government departments is an example of where his disdain would fall. Mills argues these alliances of state actors with scientific research traditions are illustrated through the ontologies conjured by the use of quantitative methods to probe social life. This is combined with what Mackie and Tett (2013) argue are the current features of globalisation, i.e. ‘flexibilisation and individualisation’, in Scotland, where further exclusion suppresses already marginalised children even further, both economically and socially. Survey methodology, however, is restricted by questionable assumptions, such as a belief that the social world is essentially homogeneous when it is in fact differentiated by status, class and age. Our paper explores the socio-material nature of actor-networks constitutive of the complex ontologies which our research participants identify. It is notable that their responses in focus groups suggested they were undecided about survey questions and whether or not the survey merited their respectful participation. Our epistemological sensibility accommodates critiques of realist research where social reality is believed to exist independently of the knowing subject: positivist research embraces the nature-human divide indicated through a narrow conception of research knowledge production, the corollary is the lives and mentalities of young people are misrepresented. Our ontological and epistemological positioning through ANT, and its application into the research knowledge production context we examine, accommodates world views tapping the undecided and dialogically provisional nature of their voices. This ‘messy’ circumstance matters to researchers of children’s geographies through foregrounding material whose classification is challenging. A political dynamic is introduced into the research environment so greater autonomy and intellectual freedom can be realised by these young people.

Ontological commitments characterising conventional research approaches and their theorisation inevitably conjure different findings from those we adumbrate. Through our particular mode of participatory research, coupled with a socio-materialist theoretical framework, our participants struggled successfully to communicate their interpretation and social values. The findings nudge recognition of the role of moral values and human attachment relations as critical to the lives of our participants. Their perspectives speak about power, marginalisation, manipulation and a spurious authenticity that they connect with the research design and questions we asked them to explore. Finally, data produced through ANT inspired methodologies are notoriously ‘messy’; we have sought to order these data thematically and by recourse to tabulated structure (Law, 2009; Rautio, 2013). We urge children’s geographers to continue to question the *a priori* (Prout, 2011: 4; Latour, 1993).

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