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Participatory Visual Methods for Understanding Children's Lives in Marginalized Neighborhoods

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Discipline

Sociology [D1]

Sub-discipline

Sociology of Family [SD-Soc-13]

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Advanced Undergraduate

Postgraduate

Contributor Biography

Helen Lomax's research explores the everyday lives of children, young people, and families. Recent grants include an Arts Council grant with Milton Keynes Gallery to explore the impact of arts-based interventions on children's wellbeing, social connectivity, and belonging and an

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant for advanced postgraduate training in visual methods (http://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/aiem). She also leads an Erasmus+ Key Action 2 project "Cyber Safe Generation" (CyGen) (https://www.researchgate.net/projects?type=own) which brings together expertise from four European countries to co-design educational resources with children to support their online safety. Her methodological interests are focused on developing methods for researching with children. These include participatory filmmaking, drawing, and photography and incorporate working with filmmakers and artists as a method of co-production and engagement.

Published Articles

Fink, J., & Lomax, H. (2016). Sharing images, spoiling meanings? Class, gender and ethics in visual research with girls. *Girlhood Studies, 9*, 20-36. Retrieved from http://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/girlhood-studies/girlhood-studies-overview.xml

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Abstract

This case study explores the contribution of participatory visual methods for understanding children's everyday lives in marginalized neighborhoods. In this, it has two aims. First, drawing on two visual research projects in which children used video, photography, and drawing to record, analyze, and communicate their experiences, it will explore the ways in which these methods can help make visible children's lives from children's perspectives. Second, the case study will engage with current debates about the nature of children's participation in "child-led" research. Here, the case study will explore the ways in which children can be practically supported to contribute to the generation, analysis, and dissemination of research, as well as considering the limits of their participation and the implications for our understanding of children and childhood.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

• Understand the strengths and limitations of participatory visual methods as a method of social research with children

• Appreciate the practical challenges which can emerge when undertaking participatory visual research with children

• Explore the ways in which children's research voices may be limited by the adults around them and reflect on analytical techniques which foreground children's perspectives

• Consider the ethical issues inherent in the generation and dissemination of visual images of and by children

Case Study

Children's Lives: National Contexts

The material for this case study was generated from two research projects undertaken in the United Kingdom: "Visual dialogues: New agendas in inequalities research" (http://www.visualdialogues.co.uk/) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and "Communities in history: Representing and building the creative power of people to improve health and well-being" (http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/project/0D75D52F-204E-47D2-90C4-7B4D42003848) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Each of these studies explored children's experiences of living in low-income and marginalized neighborhoods. In common, each employed participatory visual and creative methods (participatory video, photography, and drawing). Both projects worked with children, young people, and their families and focused on the ways in which the children themselves experienced

their neighborhoods. This included a focus on outdoor space (community gardens, pocket parks, play areas, and peripheral green areas within neighborhoods) and the ways that these spaces were experienced by children as supportive of their friendships and sense of belonging. It also included the ways the local reputation and negative stereotypes of marginalized neighborhoods can spoil the identities of those who live there and how this feels for children.

The research took place between 2010 and 2014, during the economic downturn and global financial crisis. In the United Kingdom, this was met with the implementation of austerity measures, which included cuts to public services and welfare expenditure by the newly elected coalition government. The impacts were widely felt by poorer families; reports from campaigning groups and policy think-tanks at the time highlighted the growing incidence of child poverty with pessimistic forecasts for children's material wellbeing for the period to 2020 (Brewer, Browne, & Joyce 2011). This period also saw a marked decline in public sympathy for poorer people and families. A BBC Radio 4 Welfare Poll, conducted by ComRes (2012), reported that 64% of Britons believed that at least half of all benefit recipients are "scroungers."

Childhood in Crisis?

At the same time, a number of high-profile reports seemed to suggest that U.K. childhood was in a state of crisis. A report by UNICEF (2007) ranked the wellbeing of U.K. children as the lowest in a league table of developed countries, results which were widely reported in international media as evidence that British children were "unhappy, unloved, and out of control" (Morrow & Mayall, 2009, p. 217). As the authors noted, the idea that U.K. children are miserable and that childhood is in crisis became routine in U.K. media reporting at this time. These public anxieties about children and childhood appeared to focus, in part, on children's use of public space.

Teenagers and poorer children in particular were routinely presented as at risk and a risk to society (Aldridge, 2015), whereas headlines such as "Children No Longer Enjoy Playing Outdoors" (2011) (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/8623152/Children-no-longer-enjoy-playing-outdoors.html) conveyed the idea of spoiled childhoods in which children no longer have the opportunity to play freely outdoors.

As children's researchers, Holloway and Valentine (2004) have argued that these representations suggest powerful, contradictory ideas about children which are classed and gendered and reflect spatial and generational inequalities. On one hand, children are presented as romanticized victims who are denied the opportunity to "roll down hills and make daisy chains" (Telegraph, 2011) and, on the other, as hoodie-wearing villains whose use of outdoor space must be controlled ("Unhappy, Unloved, and Out of Control," 2008). This troubling of contemporary childhood can be seen in the narrative of "lost childhoods" suggested in headlines such as "British children among most housebound in world" (*The Telegraph*, 2016) (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/children/12200196/British-children-among-most-housebound-in-world.html). These media articles are accompanied by stock images of young children wired to digital media or playing appealingly outdoors to convey a sense of nostalgia for a vanishing age of childhood. The theme of loss is continued in images of older children. For example, in *Time Magazine*'s front-cover illustration, an adolescent boy stares provocatively at the viewer to illustrate its piece on childhood in "crisis." However, rather than evoking nostalgia, his facial expression, superimposed over the center of the British flag, and clothing (the "hoodie" has become a visual trope for working-class hooliganism in British culture) are deployed to convey a sense of hostility and threat.

These ambiguities about children and childhood were very much in evidence within the localities in which these research projects were undertaken. Here, children were both the subject of negative media attention and the focus of local government initiatives focused on particular forms of community activity and visibility which centered on heritage and community celebration.

Local Contexts: Children's Unequal Lives

The research took place in a large, relatively affluent town in the United Kingdom within one of the most deprived wards in that town. Health and wellbeing data for each of the neighborhoods indicate high levels of income poverty and ill-health and low levels of child wellbeing as defined by health, examination results, and crime (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010). Both neighborhoods are disparaged locally as the "worst places to live." The stigmatized status of each can be traced to the social and economic history of the town. Built during the 1970s for working-class families relocated from "slum" areas of the United Kingdom, the poor condition of housing is an ongoing problem for residents, who report problems with damp and difficulties in keeping homes warm, which negatively affect health.

Participatory Visual Research: Aims and Methods

The aim of the research was to support children from each of these neighborhoods to give voice to their experiences, working with them to develop methods to enable them to communicate their experiences. In this, the research had a broader objective, which was to redress the lack of children's voice in place-based research and the lack of voice of these particular children, from these particular neighborhoods. Although "neighborhood" or "place" is considered an important

dimension of childhood experience, how children experience where they live is little understood. So, for example, although there are powerful accounts of the ways adults feel about their neighborhoods which encompass adult understandings of how this affects their parenting (Popay et al., 2003), much less attention is given to how children themselves feel about where they live. As Aldridge (2015) suggests, this oversight can result in a distorted and unrepresentative picture of children's experiences and childhood. To understand children's lives, we need research by and with children. The next section considers how participatory visual methods may offer a means to work with children to support and give voice to children's knowledge, views, and feelings.

Participatory Visual Methods: Principles and Practices

Within the social studies of childhood, there is increasing emphasis on working participatively with children in order that they might set research agendas and participate in more equal ways (Hunleth, 2011). The inclusion of children in this way is frequently presented as a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of children from passive objects to active, knowledgeable social agents (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Although not without its critics (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), this shift in emphasis is associated with the development of a range of creative and "child-centered" techniques which include participatory video and photography, mapping, drawing, and collage to support children to express their ideas. This constitutes an important attempt to include children in the production of knowledge where previously their experiences have been marginalized or absent. As Wendy Wills, Dickinson, Meah, and Short (2015) suggest, visual methods "help to lay bare phenomenon which are mundane [and] taken for granted" (p. 472), offering insights which may be difficult for participants to articulate using traditional social science techniques. An example is provided in Dawn Mannay's (2010, 2017) research with girls

in which the collage-making process brought into focus one young woman's sense of incarceration. As Mannay comments, these feelings were given expression when, in preparing her collage, she found a picture of prison bars. Later in the elicitation interview, she commented that although she had not been searching for an image of imprisonment and had found the picture by chance, she felt it resonated with her own situation, feelings which she was then able to articulate to in the image-elicitation interview.

A key principle of participatory visual research with children is the potential for flexibility and choice. As Peter Moss (2010) explains, using a multimethod approach supports the many different ways that children might choose to represent, communicate, and articulate their ideas. For example, children who prefer to express themselves through creative activities (which can include art, photography, music, play-do, Lego and map-making, photography, and film) can be supported to participate in research. The key point is the flexibility of the approach, with methods adapted to support children's engagement in ways of their choosing. A fascinating example of this flexible participatory approach is provided by Susanne Grasser, Schunko, and Vogl's (2016) participatory research project with children on wild plant gathering in which the team used a diverse range of visual data collection methods to support children's different levels of participation. A further tenet of participatory visual research is that it should be "child-led." That is, children should themselves determine how they want to be involved and in what. However, what this means in practice and the degree to which this is exercised in actuality have come under increasing scrutiny. This is considered next.

Participatory Visual Methods: Critical Perspectives

> The suggestion that methods are child-led and child-oriented effectively circumvents the need for further discussion of the social dynamics that shape data-collection and analysis. (Jean Hunleth 2011, p. 82)

A fundamental principle underpinning the use of creative and visual methods is that engaging children in creative activities enables them to give voice to their experiences. However, these claims are increasingly contested. As the above quotation from Jean Hunleth suggests, simply stating that research is "child-led" has precluded critical discussion about what this actually means in practice. Of particular concern is the way in which children may be unequally involved in research. This includes how power may be unequally distributed between adult researchers and children as well as the ways that adult priorities may, despite the best intentions of adult researchers, drive research agendas (Gillies & Robinson, 2010). As Holland, Renold, Ross, and Hillman (2010) suggest, much of what passes as creative participatory research with children are in fact highly managed encounters between adult researchers and children. A further challenge is offered by Mannay's (2015) observation that although children are increasingly involved in data generation (i.e., drawing pictures and taking photographs), the degree to which they are involved in deciding the focus of research or its analysis and dissemination is much less clear. My own research too has included critically reflecting on what such methods add to understanding of children's lives and what they mask or make difficult to see. This has included developing methods of working with children to support their involvement in analysis and dissemination that involves paying critical attention to the social dynamics between adults and children at all stages of the research. As you will explore in this case study, this includes a consideration of the ways in which children's opportunities to have a voice about their lives may be constrained by adults

who seek to shield them from particular forms of stigma or are unable to see children's viewpoints in children's visual outputs.

Visual Methods in Action: Children's Lives in Focus

More than 60 children aged 3 to 14 took part in the visual research projects presented in this case study in which children worked collaboratively with the research team (which included a visual artist, sculptor, participatory filmmaker, as well as social scientists). The children worked together with the research team to define projects' aims; choose the methods; generate, edit, and analyze material; and disseminate findings. Collectively, the projects focused on children's everyday lives in their neighborhoods, utilizing a range of visual methods, including participatory film, photography, video interviews, drawing, painting, and sculpture. The projects produced several hundred photographs, images, and drawings; over 100 hr of film; and two participatory films, *Coffee Hall Friends* (https://youtu.be/zmhzCx-XTGw) and *We Love Tinkers Bridge* (https://youtu.be/dE6kjDiOdqE), which can be viewed here. You might want to take a moment to view the films before you go on to read the next section of the case study which considers the challenges of supporting children's involvement in visual research and how this can be overshadowed by the institutional priorities of partner organizations and stakeholders.

Production in Focus: Opportunities for Flexibility and Spontaneity?

Each project involved working for an extended period with children and required negotiation with gatekeepers (community workers, teachers, and parents). In this, the research team were

fortunate in that our research objectives broadly aligned with these gatekeepers' priorities who were keen to support children's participation in research. However, this is not to suggest that our objectives were always completely aligned. Rather, they required negotiation and compromise. This is mentioned not to undermine the potential of participatory methods for involving children in research but rather to make visible the ways children's participation may be structured by institutions and actors beyond the immediate control of researchers and children. This is illustrated in our experience of one strand of larger project in which we worked with children attending a primary school. Part of this project involved a photography walking tour during which children took photographs of the neighborhood and then worked together in small groups to consider what these photographs signified. Permission to work with the children was given on the understanding that the team would adhere to agreed routes and that we would complete the tour within a specified time period. Although this was understandable in terms of the school's safeguarding responsibilities, the nature of participation felt tangibly different to what we had experienced working with children outside school and where we had significant latitude to support the children to set the terms of their involvement. In contrast, the photography walking tour was experienced as a compromise with a notable tension between our wishes to respond to children's clear desire to linger in particular locations and the necessity to "keep up" with the timetable and route imposed by the teachers. These challenges illustrate that the different ways of accessing children through partner organizations can foreground the relationships that may then emerge between researchers and children. The necessity of tailoring our expectations to fit with the school's regime meant that the degree of control children were allowed in this strand of the research was limited, although it did offer insights into this aspect of children's lives at school.

With the exception of the aforementioned school-based project, fieldwork was conducted through community groups and involved working out-of-school hours. So, although the school-based project involved working on a set day each week over the school year, the community-based projects involved working with children during school holidays and after school. This meant we could be responsive to children's own schedules, negotiating with them to fit in with their out-of-school and after-school activities. This flexibility also extended to the ways in which we organized the research activities. For example, for the production of the participatory film, *Coffee Hall Friends*, children worked with us to decide what they would film, having mapped out a rough plan about where they would film and whom they might interview. This flexibility gave opportunity for spontaneous encounters with neighbors, dog walkers, and older adults attending a lunch club and offered important insights into children's lives on the estate. The ease with which they navigated their way around the neighborhood, its shops, and green spaces and talked with other children and adults in impromptu interviews is captured in the film and gives a strong sense of their belonging and connection to place.

Coproduction in Practice: Scheduling Activities and Distributing Roles

This flexible approach included the choice and scheduling of activities. Time was made available for each research task, within which children were encouraged to consider what could be achieved over the available time period. As part of this process, children were encouraged to set the pace and within this framework supported each other to achieve the tasks they had set. This distributed decision-making also ensured the children's ownership of the activity. The flexibility within each task also meant that children could select an element of an activity (e.g., choosing digital images to be included in the film, editing, or drawing captions) of their choosing.

Particular children would tend on occasion to drive an activity, whereas those who were disinclined to engage in a particular task were able to participate in an activity of their choosing without being pressured to do something they did not feel comfortable with or which did not appeal.

An advantage of participatory visual methods is that it can offer lots of significant roles for children. These can be swapped during the course of the research so that children each have the opportunity to direct, to lead on camera or audio, and to interview, edit, or create artwork. Most children tried out all of these different roles. In addition, the variety of creative methods on offer in each project meant a wide choice of creative media for the children to work with (cameras, audio-recoding equipment, art materials, and modeling material). In addition, we made available dressing up clothes, anticipating that younger children might enjoy these. In fact, these had a wide appeal, providing light relief and a break from the work of editing film material for all age groups.

Interpretive Dilemmas: Visual Dialogues With Cameras

The films and photographs produced as part of the two projects make visible the ways in which the physical environment of neighborhoods can support children's social relationships and attachments. These experiences are articulated through the children's embodied interaction with each other and with the camera and are observable in their deployment of particular media (captions, drawings, and still-photography) and visual tropes (skipping, bouncing, and humorous "talking" sticks). This includes a sequence in *Coffee Hall Friends* in which children take turns to glide down a slide toward the camera while proclaiming "we love Coffee Hall." In *We Love Tinkers Bridge*, the description of the community garden as a place to "read," "play football,"

and "just relax" is accompanied by close-up shots of grasses and nature with a soundtrack that evokes tranquility and calm.

In this way, through documentary-style films, viewers are given access to children's ideas about friendship, the importance of parks and green spaces, and the opportunities such spaces afford for friendship and belonging. The framing of shots: Panning to show the vastness of the park and cropping to highlight the planting that they have done in the community garden create a visual narrative through which children show the films' audiences what is important to them. Through these visual media, viewers are offered a more nuanced picture of children's lives than suggested in neighborhood statistics and in research *on* children. This has wider policy implications which include the importance of well-designed, safe outdoor spaces (community gardens, pocket parks, and peripheral spaces) for children's wellbeing. However, this is one particular interpretation of the children's intentions; other viewers may see the films differently, for example, as a partial, sentimentalized, or sanitized version of children's lives.

These interpretative dilemmas illustrate the complex demands of interpreting the visual. This is captured by the sociologist Les Back (2009) in his assertion that "photographs do not simply portray or communicate . . . They are, paradoxically . . . full of information and mysterious and depthless." (p. 471) He suggests that to understand photographs, " it is necessary to ethnographically situate them in their social and historical context." Back's analysis suggests the need for an analytical approach which makes visible children's intentions—one which recognizes what children are saying with cameras as part of a wider conversation or visual dialogue with audiences. As this section considers, children, as reflexive knowing subjects, are only too aware of the "inspecting gaze" that surrounds young people and poorer people and places. This is clearly evident in the children's narratives captured during the hours of filming

(but not included in the participatory films). As one child explained, "people don't think much of coffee hall." A further example is provided in one child's description of her photograph of "the mound," a grassy hillock which separates the executive homes from the terraced—mostly social—housing.

Figure 1.

Caption: "The mound."

This was mentioned as a place to have fun (rolling down and sledging) while also that it "separated the two classes of people." Such comments reflect children's understanding of local narratives about the ways in which the estate is designed and landscaped to reinforce social division (large private dwellings separate from smaller social housing). These interpretations are not immediately visible in the images and films. Rather, the feel of the films is celebratory, which, as Milne, Mitchell, and De Lange (2012) argue, can be a problem with participatory video as it suggests a partial view of children's experiences. I want to propose instead that we need to acknowledge and explore why children's images appear celebratory, how they get to look this way and why. A focus on children's intentions or "auteur theory" (Mannay, 2010) and, more particularly, how these intentions reflect and respond to the wider socio-economic contexts of children's lives can offer clearer insights into children's lives in marginalized neighborhoods. The children triumphant images of the estates parks, their captions, and positive visual tropes can be seen as a way of challenging dominant negative stereotypes about their lives and "speaking back" to this negative narrative (Holland, 2004). As the next section considers, adults are also aware of these stigmatizing discourses, and this shapes their response to children and the nature of their involvement.

Limits of Voice: Protecting Children and Preserving Childhood

As I have explored elsewhere (Lomax, Fink, Singh, & High, 2011), adults' responses to children about life in low-income neighborhoods can be seen to safeguard childhood from wider negative portrayals of life in disadvantaged neighborhoods, for example, presenting neighborhoods as spaces of inclusion and cohesion and glossing over troubles (such as speeding cars, petty crime, and financial hardship). This can be seen in the film *Coffee Hall Friends* in which residents, in interviews with the children, downplayed suggestions of anti-social behavior and discord ("every estate has its problems") while describing the ways in which the estate is "coming together." Narratives from adults and parents filmed and interviewed by children for *We Love Tinkers Bridge* are similarly positive. The estate is described as a place "I love" with "great parks" and with "a good community spirit." This is not to suggest that adults are insincere or misrepresenting their experiences but rather that adults' responses to children need to be understood in the context of wider stigmatizing discourses of low-income neighborhoods. As the earlier section considered, both estates are disadvantaged on a range of indicators, disadvantage that children might not be explicitly aware of, but which parents and adults must negotiate and manage on children's behalf. Viewed through this lens, narratives about neighborliness and community spirit are a means of challenging dominant narratives of shirkers and skivers (Stuckler & Reeves 2013). As Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, and Westmarland (2007) explain, "people are not just addressed or summoned by dominant discourses but also 'answer back'" (p. 142). Their efforts in this regard can be viewed as an attempt to challenge the prevailing

narrative of "improper places" (Popay et al. 2003) and to assert an alternative narrative to claim a legitimate moral identity.

Conclusion: Lessons From the Field

This case study has explored the ways in which creative visual methods can offer children opportunities to voice their experiences and for you to reflect on how you might work practically with children to support this process. It has suggested that children's visual outputs (films photographs, and drawings) may offer a more nuanced picture of children's lives than that suggested by research on children while also recognizing that children's images need careful interpretation. This includes a consideration of the way that children's research voices may be limited by the adults around them. It has responded to the critique that the visual may offer only a partial picture of children's lives. Rather, the suggestion is that the visual offers opportunities to understand how children, as social actors themselves, respond in their image-making practices to dominant and stigmatizing narratives. Our task as social scientists is to make visible children's intentions, including how the visual is discursively shaped. Rather than seeing this as a failure of "child-led" methods, I have suggested that an analytical focus on this process, exploring what is being said and what is silenced in the process of production, can enable a richer understanding of children's lives in low-income neighborhoods.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Take a few minutes to watch the films *Coffee Hall Friends* (https://youtu.be/zmhzCx-XTGw) and *We Love Tinkers Bridge* (https://youtu.be/dE6kjDiOdqE) and note your impressions. What do you think the children were trying to convey about where they live through their filmmaking?

How do your views compare with the interpretations offered in the analysis presented in the case study?

2. Understanding the social and cultural context of children's lives

As the case study explored, children's lives do not take place in a vacuum but are shaped by powerful forces (through institutions such as the school, family, and media). Before you start a participatory project with children, it can be useful to spend some time exploring the wider social and cultural contexts of children's lives. This could include a consideration of how children are portrayed in local, national, and international media and in policy and reports. To do this, generate some key words associated with your topic (children's diet, health, outdoor play, poverty, education, examination results) and type them in to a search engine (such as Google and Google images). Note what you find and any reactions you have to the words and images that are used to describe and represent children's experience. *How might these create a particular culture for children?*

You can read more about the ways in which media and policy may suggest particular ideas about children and create a negative culture for children in Morrow and Mayall (2009).

3. Consider what drawing, collage, and other creative methods can offer as a means of researching with children

This case study has mainly focused on the use of photography and video in participatory research with children (although as you will have read, the study also made use of drawing and sculpture). A valuable discussion of the broad range of methods available to children's researchers can be found in Dawn Mannay's (2015) and Helen Kara's (2015) books on this topic. Other useful texts are Pat Thomson's (2008) and Alison Clark's (2010) books on visual and creative research with children. Dawn Mannay's book includes methods such as "sandboxing" and collaging, as well as

photography, whereas David Gauntlett, who works predominately with adults, uses Lego, plasticine, and pipe cleaners. His useful website can be accessed here (http://davidgauntlett.com/). Janet Fink who works with adults and children uses emotion maps and collage interviews. You can find out more about her use of these techniques in http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/enduringlove/. Spend some time exploring the different media and consider what they might offer you in your research with children. What are the advantages and limitations of each? Further resources and web links are provided below.

4. Ethics in visual research with children

How to balance our responsibilities with children and young people's "rights" to be seen and heard remains contested. Wiles, Coffey, Robison, and Heath's (2010) survey of visual researchers reveals that although some researchers use identifiable images, seeing any attempts to anonymize as "akin to erasing identity" (Brady & Brown, 2013, p. 105), others see anonymization as necessary to mitigate "possible future harm" (Wiles et al., 2010, p. 13). Whatever they decide, visual researchers report feeling conflicted and anxious about these issues, which remain unresolved in the wider discipline. The research presented for this case study used a two-stage consent process in which participants consented to (a) take part in the research and (b) allow their images to be disseminated. How might you resolve some of the ethical tensions of supporting children to have a voice in research and protecting children from harm? Use the resources listed below to help you:

Fink, J., & Lomax, H. (2016). Sharing images, spoiling meanings? Class, gender and ethics in visual research with girls. *Girlhood Studies, 9*, 20-36. Retrieved from http://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/girlhood-studies/girlhood-studies-overview.xml

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    1, 79-95. Retrieved from

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Further Reading

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Kara, H. (2015). *Creative research methods in the social sciences: A practical guide*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

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