Rendering Family: Using auto-driven interview techniques with children in LDCs

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The well-being of children has garnered considerable attention in recent years. However, representing well-being has proven challenging – well-being is multi-faceted and can be difficult to measure. New indices and indicators are being developed and refined. As the research agenda on children pushes forward, numerous researchers have called for greater involvement of children in research. Caregiver portrayals of children's lives are useful, but still one person's representation of another's life. Primary caregivers, often mothers, are good proxies, but proxies nonetheless. Children's representations of their own lives can differ from the representations of primary caregivers. The social reality of children is best depicted when data collection includes direct contact with children.

Ethnography is a popular way to collect data on children. Observational data is also popular. Interviews with children are less common. There are several reasons for the limited use of direct interviews. First, interviews rely on communication skills. Children may not have the language or social skills they need to provide valuable data when data are collected in interview format. Their language facility can be limited. Also, they may not feel comfortable with interview formalities. Moreover, the interview format risks raising sensitive issues with a child. Discussion of sensitive topics requires extreme care. Conducting research on the well-being of children that undermines well-being is hardly ethical, let alone good research practice.

This paper explores the advantages and disadvantages of collecting data from children using auto-driven interview techniques. With auto-driven interviews, researchers supply a stimulus, and respondents direct interview content. Auto-driven interviews have the potential to put children at ease because the auto-driven format allows children greater control over interview content. We discuss this methodology and its application to collection of data from children. Subsequently, we describe our experience using the pictures generated with single use cameras as the stimuli in auto-driven interviews with children in the country of Lesotho. We evaluate the usefulness of this technique for interviews with children in low-income settings and discuss associated ethical issues. We argue that 1) interviewing children directly is valuable; 2) auto-driven interviewing techniques are useful for engaging children in interviews and for minimizing interviewer effects; and 3) single-use cameras can be used successfully in interviews with children, but they may not be the best stimulus in low-income settings.