

A Method for Identifying and Understanding the Concerns of Refugee Children and Adolescents

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Abstract

This report describes the method employed during a study on identifying and understanding the concerns of children and young people affected by armed conflict and forced migration. It outlines the steps taken by the researchers in constructing a Children's Worry Scale by first collecting children's concerns, and then coding these into different categories and selecting a number of items from each category to construct a questionnaire. This questionnaire includes a rating scale for each item where the children can indicate how much they worry about a specific issue ("never", "hardly ever", "occasionally", "often" etc.). The next step involves teaching the children how such a scale works and administering the questionnaire to the children. Analysis of the results will show which items are the most worrying to the children and more detailed analyses of variance can be undertaken in order to identify which items are of particular concern to different groups of children. The final step consists of conducting focus groups to gain more in-depth understanding of the issues and to explore how children cope with the difficulties they face.

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Summary of the study

This study by MacMullin and Loughry [for full text see MacMullin and Loughry (2000) (MacMullin, Colin and Loughry, Maryanne (2000). A child-centred approach to investigating refugee children's concerns. In F. Ahearn (Ed.), *Psychosocial wellness of refugees*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.)] is based on the belief that in order to assist children and young people who are affected by conflict and forced migration, we need to understand their inner concerns. Frequently, however, attempts to understand the worries and concerns of these children have used pre-determined lists of events that adult researchers think are worrisome to children without checking with the children whether this is actually the case. Adult-constructed instruments and procedures are designed to use hypothetical relationships such as those between traumatic events and anxiety, or the impact of factors such as parenting styles on such relationships. Often such studies have concluded that children are traumatised by their experiences of armed conflict and forced migration.

The authors of this study, conducted in Beach Camp, Gaza, aim to identify a way in which the concerns and worries of children can be taken seriously and understood in their own terms. They employed a four-part method that involved, in the first instance, young people merely listing the things that worried them. A questionnaire was then constructed from the children's own lists of worries, called the Children's Worry Scale. Next, the children were surveyed with this questionnaire. Finally, focus groups were held in which the children were asked to elaborate upon their concerns, discuss the strategies that they use to cope with these worries, and to provide advice to younger children on how they might best manage similar kinds of problems.

Two studies were undertaken in UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) in Beach Camp during 1998. The first study involved 194 children (103 boys and 91 girls) aged 8 to 14 years, and the second study involved 287 children (141 boys and 146 girls) aged 11 to 16 years.

The results of the study indicate that the methods adopted are useful in identifying a wide variety of issues about which these particular groups of children worry. These range from macro issues such as politics, war and religion through to micro issues such as personal friendships and exam anxiety. The procedures have also highlighted differences and commonalities among the worries of boys and girls, and to a lesser extent, developmental differences in children's worries.

The children worry most about what are mainly societal and group concerns such as dirty streets, Israeli occupation, war, corruption, death of Iraqi children and the lack of medicines in the hospitals. High on the list of worries were also societal concerns about behaviour such as women not wearing the veil, people taking drugs and alcohol, people swearing in the street, and bad manners of young children. The trend in the relative importance of the children's concerns moves from the collective to the individual.

The issues that appear to be of least concern to the children are personal concerns such as being beaten, and having no pocket money, and concerns about their parents' relationships; quarrelling and getting divorced. There is a marked contrast with the types of worries reported by children in individualistic cultures such as those in the United States (see Silverman, et al., 1995) and Australia (see Christie & MacMullin, 1998). In these countries, concerns appear to move from the individual to the group, to the global (Triandis, 1994). When a society has a shared common history of war, forced migration, military occupation, and ongoing political conflict, as has been the case in Gaza, a sense of collectivism is strengthened.

The authors conclude that the children had few strategies for coping with their worries and very little advice to offer their younger brothers and sisters. Apart from advice about spending time on organisation as a way to prevent problems with homework and exams, and talking over concerns with family members, all other ideas centred on: (1) accepting things the way they are, (2) seeking out diversions such as play, reading, watching television or walking; and (3) prayer and reading the Quran. Those who would seek to help children with their worries (social workers, teachers or school counsellors) could provide children with simple strategies for preventing or tackling those worries that are within their control. These might include worries about

homework and exams, difficulties with friends and quarrelling with siblings.

The procedures described here give researchers and practitioners a method for investigating the worries of children that promises to provide additional information to that gained from adult-focused approaches. Exploring children's own theories about the nature of their concerns, and the ways in which young people can best help themselves can provide additional insight.

What follows below is a description of the research method employed in these studies that describe step-by-step the methodology for conducting such research.

Step 1: Collecting Children's Concerns

1. Identify a sample of children from the population that you want to survey.
2. Seek permission from the relevant adults to work with the children.
3. Explain to this group that you want to know what young people their age worry about.
4. Explain the word “worry”¹. Do not give examples. Rather, explain that to worry is to be very concerned about something. To think a lot about things that cause young people to be upset.
5. Give all of the children a blank piece of paper. Ask them to indicate if they are a boy or a girl at the top of the paper, and to record their age. Now ask them to write down the things about which they, or young people their age, worry. This should take the form of a list, with each different item on a new line.
6. Provide extra pieces of paper, if needed.
7. Collect the children's lists.

Step 2: Constructing a Children's Worry Scale

1. Use coloured pens to code the children's responses from step one. Choose a colour for boys and a different one for girls and mark the full length of each page in the left hand margin so that, when each sheet is cut into strips, you will know the gender of the person who suggested each item. If you have a range of ages, you can do the same thing with a different colour for each age group. The coloured line for age could go on the right hand side of each sheet.
2. Now, pool read all of the items. Establish a number of categories into which you will sort the items. These categories should be suggested by the items themselves. However, they are likely to include categories such as: peer relations, parents and other family, school, health and safety, living conditions. Assign items to categories.
3. Select a number of items from each category that serve as good representatives of the major worries within each category. Check on the distribution of items suggested by both boys and girls within each category and ensure the same ratio when selecting the examples to be used in the questionnaire. You may do the same with age groups, if appropriate.
4. Construct the questionnaire with 30 - 50 items. As a stem use a statement like: "During the last month, how much did you worry about each of these things:". Then follow each item with a 4- or 5-point Likert-type scale, using words such as "never", "hardly ever", "occasionally or sometimes", "often", "very often or nearly all the time". Whatever your choice of words, try and ensure that you have increments that are about the same value. At the top of the first page, ask the respondent to indicate gender and age.
Note: the stem "how much did you worry?" was chosen to cover both the idea of frequency, that is 'how often' and the idea of intensity, that is 'how worrisome was that situation?' Whilst children are provided with responses that indicate an answer to the frequency question, it is assumed that their choices are also based, in part, on their responses to the implied question about intensity.

The differences between these two concepts can be explored by constructing a questionnaire with two scales - one for frequency, "how often do you worry about these things?" and one for intensity, "when you do worry about this thing, how great is your concern?"

Step 3: Administering and Interpreting the Scale

1. Administer the Children's Worry Scale to any group with the same characteristics as the children who suggested the items in Step 1.
2. Provide for the children an environment where they feel free to complete the questionnaire without anyone looking at what they write. Explain that they do not have to record their names and that their questionnaire will be treated anonymously.
3. Explain to the children that you want to know what it is that children their age worry about (and if it is applicable - so that adults might be in a better position to help young people).
4. Teach the children how to use a 4- or 5-point Likert-type scale. This may involve a mock scale where children are asked a question with a similar stem, such as: "during the last month, how often did you ... each fruit". Similarly, you could ask children how much they like particular foods. Choose examples that are likely to yield a spread of responses. If possible, work these examples through on a black board (or similar) so that you can demonstrate how to record answers on such a scale. It is useful to encourage children to consider using the full range of responses available to them, rather than only using the extreme poles of the scale.
5. Distribute the questionnaires to the children, have them answer the questions about gender and age and, either (1) leave them to complete the form on their own; or (2) read each statement to them one at a time and ask them to record their choice before moving on, as a group, to the next item. The latter method is useful for younger children, those whose reading skills might interfere with their ability to complete the form accurately, or children who may be having difficulties understanding the process. In this way the meanings of each response may be reinforced a number of times throughout the questionnaire.
6. Collect questionnaires and conduct preliminary analysis in preparation for the final step - the focus groups.
7. Two different methods may be used to conduct the preliminary analysis of these data:
 - (1) "eyeballing" - that is, go through all of the forms and look for overall impressions about which items seem to be the most worrisome and note these for further discussion in the focus groups;
 - (2) calculate the average (mean) for each item in order to more accurately determine which things are most worrying the children.

Analyses of variance could also be undertaken in order to identify which items are of particular concern to different groups of children (e.g. boys vs. girls, or different age groups).

Step 4: Conducting the Focus Groups

1. Establish focus groups of approximately 6 children (range could be from 4 -8).
2. Explain purpose of the meeting, i.e., to help you better understand the things that children their age worry about, to help you learn how children cope with these worries, and to find out how adults might be better able to help children deal with these concerns.
3. Outline the procedures and rules for the focus group. These may include promises to keep what is heard confidential, to take turns in talking, and not to interrupt one another. Explain also how the tape recorder is to be used and what will happen to the tapes after the session. Note: It is better to use a small hand-held tape recorder that can be passed from one speaker to another. The children should hold the tape recorder close to their mouths and speak clearly into it. Passing the tape recorder from one to another marks turn-taking and permission to speak. This reduces interruptions, but it may also inhibit spontaneous comments. Nonetheless, this method has worked well in a number of different settings.
4. One way to proceed with the session is to take one topic at a time and pursue each of the four main questions in regards to that topic, and then move on to the next topic.
5. The main questions are:
 - (i) The questionnaire results indicated that children worry a lot about (insert particular worry, e.g. "being punished by the teachers"). Tell me more about this. Help me understand what happens, why it happens, and how young people worry.
 - (ii) How do you and other children cope with this particular worry, or these particular situations?
 - (iii) What advice would you give to younger children who might have to face these concerns when they get to your age (or perhaps they are facing these same concerns now).
 - (iv) How can adults (e.g. social workers, counsellors, other helpers) best help young people deal with these worries.
6. Use supplementary questions, and reflective listening to help children expand on their answers. Also, specifically invite quieter children to join in the discussions.
7. After the sessions, transcribe the tapes ready for coding and analysis

Notes

1. Note: the word “worry” and the word “concern” are meant to refer to the same concept and are used interchangeably.

Appendix 1: Links

Refugee Studies Centre: <http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/>