

## Thesis abstract

# A philosophical-empirical interrogation of infant participation in research

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This thesis is about a philosophical-empirical interrogation of infant participation in research. It reports on a doctoral study that brought together philosophy from diverse backgrounds, empirical data, and an interrogation of the concept of infant participation. The study was located in an Australian Research Council Linkage project that endeavoured to enable infants to enact their participatory rights in research concerning their lives in early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments.

Moves towards employing participatory research approaches with infants are influenced by several discourses including discourses of children's rights and discourses related to participatory research with older children. Notably, Article 12 in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* is often presented by researchers as entitling infants the right to participate in research concerning their lives. Language, methodological foci, and methods used in participatory research with older children are also frequently presented as appropriate. The rhetoric of infant participation has, therefore, mostly been put into practice as 'listening' to and reporting on infants' experiences and 'perspectives' via observation of their expressions and behaviours. Once ascertained, those experiences and 'perspec-

tives' are reported on, by and large, in the form of second-hand narratives, and excerpts of video-recordings, or case-studies, that are subsequently analysed through various theoretical and conceptual lenses. Whether or not such research achieves what it claims to achieve in regards to enabling infants to efficaciously enact their human rights, and particularly their participatory rights, is generally left unquestioned. This thesis problematises and responds to that absence of questioning and, in the process, provides an in-depth example of a philosophical-empirical interrogation of infant participation in research.

The aim of the study was to negotiate ethical and participatory relations with the infants involved in the study, from within the complexities of the moments that we shared. To that end, I shifted my attention away from researching and writing about infants' expressions and behaviours (infants' bodies, so to speak) towards researching and writing about my own bodily responses as I opened onto a world that included infants (and others) in specific times and spaces; and the ethical reflexivity and questions that emerged. I also drew on moments shared with six infants (aged birth to eighteen months) in three Family Day Care homes, and a diverse range of scholarly sources that

included Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a common thread, to interrogate the questions and uncertainties that emerged.

The findings of the study suggest that although attention has been given to responding to infants' rights as outlined in Article 12, and the value of that response is recognised, much less attention has been directed towards critiquing and evaluating the effectiveness of those responses in practice. This has, perhaps, resulted in a gap between the rhetoric of infant participation and how infant participation is negotiated between particular researchers and infants in specific times and spaces. The findings of the study also revealed that it was through my own carnal responsivity to infants' pres-

ence, during my encounters with infants, that they were able to displace my experience of self, provoke ethical reflexivity and provide unexpected possibilities for moving forward together towards a shared future. Engaging with that experience of displacement and the questions provoked is essential to establishing any emancipatory discourse concerning infants.

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