



# **CROSS-CULTURAL CHILD RESEARCH**

## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

HALLVARD FOSSHEIM  
(ED.)





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(ED.)



*The Norwegian National Research  
Ethics Committees*

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## *Preface*

The present volume is the indirect result of an initiative taken by Jon-Kristian Johnsen at Childwatch International Research Network. Johnsen contacted Helene Ingierd and Hallvard Fosshem at the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, and in cooperation the two institutions organised a one-day conference held at Litteraturhuset in Oslo on 18 March, 2011. The meeting was financed by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees and Childwatch International Research Network, with additional support from the Norwegian National Commission for UNESCO. The essays in this anthology are based on talks given at that conference. We thank everyone who has taken part in placing these central research ethical issues on the agenda.

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## *Introduction*

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Research on, with, or by children is important as a source of knowledge. At the same time, such research faces challenges that are both similar to and different from research involving adults. On a general level, this can be illustrated by reflecting briefly on three central research ethical principles: respect, beneficence and justice.

Not surprisingly, for each of these three ethical dimensions specific challenges are generated in cross-cultural settings. This is not because the principles themselves are the property of some cultures rather than others. Every culture has notions of justice, of beneficence, and of respect. How those principles are expressed, however, is something that can vary with the specific cultural and sub-cultural setting. This means that in cross-cultural research, part of the ethical complexity is generated by the fact that

the various agents involved have differing understandings of how, say, respect is expressed, and live in different contexts where the possibilities of expressing respect—as well as disrespect—depend on a variety of traditions and institutions.

*Respect for the person* is often manifested in terms of respect for a person's autonomy. But autonomy, understood as the ability to exist as a responsible, reflexive and rational agent, is something that comes in degrees. Age is by no means the only variable relevant for judging such degrees, but it is one of the central ones. In many cases, then, it can be useful to think of autonomy not as something simply present, but as something to be protected with a view to the person's future. In other cases, it may help one's ethical reflection to think of respect for the person not solely in terms of autonomy, but also more broadly in terms of dignity.

The demand for *beneficence*, or doing well, on the part of the researcher is often taken as a requirement that the research should result in good things for the research participants. Such good consequences can take many forms, from the implementation of research-based policies that ameliorate their lives, to the joy of sharing, learning and teaching that they might experience through partaking in certain forms of research. In some cases, the question arises as to whether the good that comes out of the research should always benefit the participants directly, or whether there might also be justification in the fact that the good in question benefits others of the same group. It should also be noted that beneficence cannot be calculated in such a way that doing some harm is tolerable as long as one does more good than harm overall. On the contrary, exposing children—or anyone, for

that matter—to risk of harm, injury or other negative effects, is never unproblematically justified by the good which will also accrue from the research.

*Justice*, meanwhile, has sometimes been thought of as a question that touches exclusively on the issue of selecting the research participants. And it is true that this is an important question, among other things because it has a bearing on the distribution of burdens and benefits. But research is often related to justice in other ways than this, not least politically. What sort of research questions are posed, what sort of institutions or agencies benefit from the research, and what sort of policies, foreign or domestic, are shaped or buffered by the research are all questions having to do with justice. As important can also be the experience of justice or injustice which the research participants are left with, not least in cases where these participants are children, beings who presumably are often shaped more by their experiences than older individuals would be.

Cross-cultural settings make for further ethical complexity along each of these three axes. In many kinds of research involving children, this complexity is acknowledged as part of the research topic. But whether or not it is, it is often part of the research context. This means that there is a demand on the researcher to be a conscientious interpreter, in order that he or she manages to find and implement wise strategies and solutions. And interpretation, in turn, requires knowledge and experience. This is not to say that everything can be prepared for directly. In complex settings—and human lives always constitute complex settings—one cannot foresee every eventuality. But there are

ways of preparing for such situations nonetheless, which can make a real difference once the challenge arrives. Reflecting from the early stages of design on possible problems that might arise, and actively involving expertise where required, are ways of preparing for what one cannot be fully prepared for. Each of the contributions to this volume on one level constitutes such preparation.



ANNE TRINE KJØRHOLT elaborates her reflections through experiences from the MA programme at The Norwegian Centre for Child Research (NOSEB), a programme with 25 students from ten different countries. Kjørholt focuses on what she sees as an ethics of the encounter, where it is precisely the manifold roles of the encountering agents which generate the complex web of relations and responsibilities in which the parties engage. With experience from child research projects both in and outside Europe, Kjørholt advocates an approach where research ethical issues are integral to all aspects of the research process and design. Obtaining informed consent, paying heed to the complex role shifting that takes place in everyday interaction, and reacting appropriately when being witness to illegal activities are all phenomena made more demanding by the other's status as a child as well as by cultural differences. Important to Kjørholt is the consideration that not only is child research acceptable: children have a right to be involved in the research.

Among HARALD BEYER BROCH'S main contentions, illustrated by examples from his field work in various parts of the world, is that research which only focuses on one limited sphere is ultimately futile when the topic is one as complex as children and their lives. Children, like adults, are strategic, narrative-making beings, and should not be investigated as if they were passive receptors of cultural codes. This insight about the meaning-making activities of children makes it even less feasible to pinpoint a demarcation line between children and adults, as does the further insight that, roughly put, there is no such thing as childhood as such: what constitutes childhood in a given cultural context is co-determined by a multitude of major and minor interactions between concrete roles and spheres. The upshot is that the researcher, in order to get decent results, needs to live with the people in question and partake in the roles offered.

ELISABETH BACKE-HANSEN discusses the complex, sometimes fraught, relation between participation and protection. While participation in research for children and young people can be seen to have important functions with a view to social and democratic participation more widely, research can also have negative effects on the group. A main point in this respect concerns the need, in child research, to differentiate within the group one is researching. With the aid of two examples from recent research, she argues that there is still a marked tendency to overlook crucial situational differences in e.g. the application of questionnaires. This can come down to how a certain response on the part of the child or young person to whether one 'feels safe'

or ‘communicates well with the grown-ups here’ can mean very different things in a foster home and in an institution. In child research, the further question, Who will these studies benefit?, also presents us with problems of its own, since the individuals surveyed will no longer belong to the relevant group at the time when any benefit might be expected to accrue.

A central message in JANET BODDY’S contribution is that almost any study involving children and families is cross-cultural, when working in societies that are ethnically and culturally diverse. There is a risk in overlooking this crucial feature of the social sphere when conducting research that is not specifically concerned with phenomena recognized as culturally constituted and differentiated. This is an ethical concern because of the implications for how we account for minority perspectives in research. Boddy indicates the need to account for the intersection of ethnicity with other sample characteristics so as to avoid misattribution of findings, and to recognize variation within, as well as between, cultural groups. For example, there is a tendency to ignore or exclude minority participants in studies looking for what is ‘normal’, only to foreground them when the researchers are looking at “problems”. These issues need to be addressed at every stage of a given research project, from the definition of research questions to the analysis and dissemination of findings. There is also a need to develop concrete strategies to ensure less bias in the recruiting phase of a project by addressing potential barriers to participation for different groups within society.



RAGNHILD DYBDAHL offers a donor's perspective by reflecting on the responsibilities, and the limits of responsibility, for the agencies funding cross-cultural research on children. NORAD, as the instrument of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, funds a wide variety of research (97 per cent of the MFA's research budget is devoted to the topic of foreign aid), and the responsibilities on the donor's part are a central issue. While the researchers must be the ones to design the details of research for best possible results, the donor still has an overarching responsibility for the production and use of knowledge. This means that the researchers' formal competence is a research ethical dimension that should be crucial to all responsible funding agencies. Dybdahl emphasizes how there is a potential for development on the part of funding agencies in this respect, and points to existing guidelines and conventions as helpful tools in developing and upholding such profiles.

JASON HART articulates a deep-seated problem having to do with the roles of children in relation to research, namely the potential conflict between taking children seriously and providing adequate forms of protection for them. Often, the perspectives and wishes of children are articulated by researchers in such a way that the—often political—heart of the matter is excluded from the foreground almost a priori. In situations of war, the research focus is normally placed on children's assumed desire for peace and security in such a way that a discussion about the uses of and opportunities presented by political violence is not possible. This is partly an effect of treating the child as an

apolitical being, in isolation from social and politicized networks. Crucial to avoiding such bias in favour of the researcher's own value system is taking seriously the child as agent, as well as more broadly ensuring critical distance between the researchers and the agendas of policymakers.

## *“Childhood studies” and the ethics of an encounter: Reflections on research with children in different cultural contexts*

**ANNE TRINE KJØRHOLT**

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At the end of a very hectic day, one of our African students knocked at my door and asked for a meeting. Her opening words transformed the space from an office where my mind was filled with administrative tasks and documents, to a moral and ethical space, involving not only my mind, but also my emotions:

When we started this programme, you invited us to talk about our childhood and everyday life in the place where we had grown up. Never in my life has anybody been interested in my childhood before you asked. Now I want to share with you the part of the story that could not be told in the classroom. (Martha)

## INTRODUCTION

The story of the young woman in her mid twenties was highly dramatic, including elements pertaining to the struggle for survival in different ways, experiences of hunger, political violence and physical violence by parents and teachers. Her strength and vitality were more than striking, as was Martha's moral message at the end of her story: "I share my story with so many other children. The one and only mission I have in life is to work to improve the livelihoods for children in my country. Please support me in this."

Martha is a former student, at that time enrolled in the M.Phil. programme "Childhood Studies", an international two-year master's programme, which started in 2006 at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research at NTNU. Childhood as a social and cultural phenomenon, and a child perspective, are a main focus in our studies. Furthermore, "Childhood Studies" aims to acquire knowledge about children's everyday lives and the variety of childhoods as these are lived and experienced in different parts of the world. Methodologically, a qualitative approach is central in establishing a dialogue with children with the purpose of gaining insight into children's perspectives and experiences of their lives. Hosting Martha and other students from the global South, and running an MA programme, entail a variety of ethical challenges. To create spaces for cross-cultural dialogue between teachers and students is a core issue in order to achieve our aim with the programme. These spaces also include, I will argue, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, being confronted with the "face of the other", and what he calls the ethics of an encounter.

Among the basic ethical questions to be addressed by the teachers are: Do we contribute with appropriate and valuable knowledge of relevance for the students in their future work with children in their home countries? Do the main theoretical perspectives and concepts anchored in the social studies of children and childhood represent useful analytical tools for understanding childhood and children's lives in the global South? Furthermore, in a critical perspective I will ask: Do we prepare the students with appropriate knowledge and tools to do "ethical child research" in all phases: preparing and conducting the fieldwork, doing the analysis, and writing up the thesis?

The aim of this article is to present reflections on ethical issues and challenges related to doing research with or among children in cross-cultural contexts, and to being an academic coordinator/teacher for an M.Phil. in Childhood Studies. A particular focus will be on ethical challenges related to the spaces for dialogues and the encounter between the researchers/students and children during their fieldwork on the one hand, and between the teachers and students on the other. In similar ways, both the researchers/students in the field and the teachers are confronted with the "face of the other". My reflections will be linked to experiences from our master programme, teaching, supervision of and dialogues with master and PhD students about doing research in cross-cultural contexts.

Before discussing the "ethics of an encounter" related to the research process in the field and the encounters between teachers and students in the classroom, I will give a brief

presentation of the broad ethical perspective in which such ethics are embedded.

### **ETHICS: A BROAD AND INTEGRATIVE APPROACH**

It has been argued that discussions about research ethics tend to focus on the immediate relationships between the research participants and the researcher (Alderson and Morrow 2006). This point was confirmed in the focus group interview with the first year students. When asked what it means to be ethical in the research they are doing with or among children in different socio-cultural contexts, they immediately related to the following topics:

- Informed consent (children decide whether they want to participate in the research)
- The form of the questions (be open-minded and avoid questions that make children feel that you expect a particular answer)
- Power balance (be aware of the implications of the power differences between researcher and children)
- Confidentiality

However, I will argue that ethics represents a broad field, covering a variety of different perspectives and questions, related to different strands and traditions in philosophy. Ethics in child research is connected to debates about research ethics in general. Furthermore, this field is related to discussions within the larger field of ethics, or moral philosophy, pertaining to questions of

justice, of right and wrong, good and evil, and more. The spaces of dialogue that are created as part of child research in different contexts pertain to overall questions such as: What is the aim of the research—in whose interest is the research being carried out, for whom, and for what purpose? Which theories and concepts govern the research? In social research, terms such as relevance and usefulness (for society in general, and/or specific groups of people) are often used as criteria for being ethical. However, these criteria do not pertain to clear-cut and definite answers, but invite new questions to be addressed: Who is going to define and decide what is useful and of relevance—the researcher, or other stakeholders? Are children going to have a say in these decisions? The answers to these questions do not refer to fixed standards, but are open to discussion and reflection. Research ethics is connected to the research design—medical research differs from social research, basic research from action-oriented research, etc.

Time is key to questions of relevance. Research that today might be seen as not useful may be highly relevant in a future perspective. In other words, judgments of usefulness and relevance in research must always be connected to openness, critical reflection and with a long-term perspective in mind. Thus, I will argue for the importance of seeing research ethics in a broad perspective, as an integrative approach embedded in all aspects and phases of the research process. This also implies seeing theories, methods and research ethics as interconnected (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, Morrow 2008, Abebe 2009). Research ethics as part of the research process includes:

- Planning the research (Is it worth doing? (Alderson and Morrow 2011))
- The aim and topic of the research (In whose interest? Why and for what purpose?)
- Literature review (What do we know, and what do we not know?)
- Research questions/ focus
- Theoretical approaches and conceptualisation
- Methodology and research design
- Analysis and crafting of the research text
- Dissemination and communication of the research

Although all these dimensions are highly important, my intention is merely to include a reminder of their importance without going further into discussion of ethical issues connected to the different phases of the research. It has been argued that the best way to ensure ethics in research is to develop high-quality research. Based on this, we may ask if too narrow a focus on ethics in particular can contribute to diverting attention away from overall questions related to the aim and quality of the research, and thereby prevent interesting and useful research. Important questions to be addressed are also the role of national guidelines as a tool to ensure ethical standards in research in cross-cultural contexts. I will also argue that particular ethical issues and challenges are related to the blurred boundaries between the status of a researcher and the status of a human being.



## **DOING RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN?**

A child perspective in research presents particular challenges. During the last few decades, there has been an increasing emphasis on children as participants in research (Alderson and Morrow 2011, Ennew et al. 2009). This is also confirmed by a research report initiated by Childwatch International in 2010. The project which the report is based on aimed to “identify the ethical issues and challenges in undertaking research with and for children and young people in different majority and minority world contexts; and to identify and collate existing ethics guidelines and resources” (Powell et al. 2011, p. 1). The results from the survey, based on data from 257 researchers in 46 countries within the global research network Childwatch International, reveal that children and children’s views are included in the research by 92 per cent of the respondents (Powell et al. 2011). However, there are different views on whether children should be involved as subjects, participants, researchers or co-researchers. Based on a rights based approach anchored in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Judith Ennew argues that children have the right to be properly researched (Ennew et al. 2009). She states that:

[t]he concept of researching with children rather than about them has been widely accepted. Why? Research should contribute to giving children a voice and a face, by accentuating their perceptions and views. (Manfred Liebel, quoted in Ennew et al. 2009, p. 1)

The master's theses produced as part of our study programme contribute to revealing children's views and perspectives of lived childhoods in different cultural contexts. In the thesis *Beyond Borders* (2011), refugee children living in Lebanon were involved as participants in the research (Restan 2010). The aim was to present refugee children's perspectives on their present and future lives. Referring to Hieronymi 2008, Laila Restan argues that:

Considering that children now constitute half of the world's refugee population, it is remarkable that the long-term effect on these children still does not receive sufficient attention in the general debate on the refugee issues. (Restan 2010, p. 1)

Restan's thesis is in many ways representative of the aims and scope of many of the master's theses, generating knowledge about children's perspectives and childhoods in different cultural contexts.

To create a space for dialogue with children as part of the research process requires engagement, openness and a reflective mind. The quote below from one of the students, who conducted his fieldwork among street children in Lusaka, Zambia, reveals the importance of reflecting on previous knowledge and the need to be open-minded and guided by children in order to generate knowledge about children's lives and perspectives. He states that:

Since I grew up in this town, when I was planning my fieldwork, I thought, well, I know what happens to these children. However, whilst in the field, I realised how complicated their lifestyles and their coping strategies are. My knowledge gap

exposed, I had to be neutral and allow my informants to guide me in the research process in filling this knowledge gap. (Phiri 2009, p. 48)

Child research can approach children as objects, subjects or participants in research (Woodhead 2000). The ethical implications of the different approaches have to be addressed, and these are closely interlinked with the research questions and the methodological and theoretical perspectives that the students choose. However, to see children as researchers (Alderson 2000) can, as I see it, be problematic because it easily implies a way of essentializing children. Adults are not researchers by virtue of being human beings, neither are children. Research is a profession that requires a particular kind of knowledge and education. Therefore the researcher needs to be aware of always being in a position of power, and she/he is responsible for the research process, including the theoretical and methodological perspectives, questions asked, the development of the research design and the analysis and dissemination of the research. The researcher's responsibility also means protecting children from any research that can be harmful to them (cf. Ennew et al. 2009).

However, children need to be taken seriously as participants in the research process, and seen as competent subjects with valuable knowledge, views and ability to communicate. As I see it, there is no principal difference between adults as participants in research and young children. However, in order to obtain knowledge about very young children's perspectives, the researcher needs special skills in communication and dialogue.

Creating a meaningful space for dialogue with children also implies reflecting on the questions you ask during the research process. Many children are particularly vulnerable because they live in situations of poverty, political violence or other special circumstances. It is important to avoid questions that might reactualise past traumas. As one of our students expressed it, protecting children from harmful research also means “letting children have influence on what information about themselves they want to share with the researcher, and what they do not want to share” (student in focus group interview).

#### **CHILDHOOD IN PERSPECTIVE: NORTH AND SOUTH**

A participatory approach to child research is closely connected with the main theoretical perspectives of our Childhood Studies programme. The programme is theoretically anchored in the interdisciplinary perspectives on social studies of children and childhood, seeing children as individual rights holders and competent social actors, and childhood as a social and cultural phenomenon varying with time and place (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). These perspectives are reflected in the different courses that are part of the programme such as “social studies of children and childhood”, “history of childhood”, “children’s rights”, and “children and development in the South”. In addition, two methodology courses and a preparatory fieldwork course are included. Ethical issues are included as an integral part of the programme, but particularly addressed in the methodology courses.

The theoretical perspectives are connected with a particular understanding of what it means to be a child. These perspectives are closely related to The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Following from Aries, Jo Boyden argues that:

Children are demarcated from adults by a series of biological and psychological characteristics that are seen to be universally valid [...]. This is a particular image of childhood developed in a particular time in history, at a particular place, emphasising childhood as a life phase characterized by innocence, play and formal education. (Boyden 1990, p. 197)

Following this argument, important ethical challenges are related to the theoretical perspectives and analytical concepts that inform the research. In light of the fact that the majority of the students enrolled in our master 's programme come from countries in the global South, this topic is addressed and reflected upon in different ways. Participation rights are included in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. In the global South, children contribute in various ways to the economic and social (re)production processes of their societies. However, the participation rights in the UNCRC, emphasising children's autonomy and competence, do not address those forms of participation that are part of children's responsibilities within an extended family network in everyday life. A pertinent question is whether rights discourses might have the unintended effect of contributing to and accelerating processes of making children's competence and manifold contribution invisible (Kjørholt 2009). Furthermore,

this fundamental question relates to the question of whether there are possible conflicts and tensions between notions of participation as constituted within rights discourses that are claimed to be global, and children's "traditional" and integrative forms of participation in social, political, and economic life in different local and national contexts.

Childhoods as these are lived and experienced in different parts of the global South, and the ways in which they are closely intertwined with the political economy are explicitly addressed on the course "Children and development in the South", which provides critical reflections on theoretical concepts and perspectives developed in a modern global North context. Global discourses on children's rights are also critically discussed, for example by including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Furthermore, a socially constructed perspective on children and childhood also implies being open to the varieties of different childhoods. Still, there is a need for more research on children's everyday lives and childhoods in the global South, not only in order to obtain empirical knowledge about the varieties of different childhoods, but also in order to challenge and revise theoretical concepts of children and childhood developed in the global North, and avoid exporting them to the global South. To discuss childhood in perspective also implies a critical reflection on how children in different cross-cultural contexts are represented. One example of such critique is a master's thesis which included critical perspectives on "mainstream discourses" on representations of children in contexts of conflict and war in Uganda (Achan 2009).

## **CHILDREN'S VOICES? EXPERIENCES AS EMBODIED, COMPLEX AND SITUATED**

Global rights discourses and expressions like “children’s voices”, “children’s perspectives”, “children as social actors and participants” have increasingly become keywords both in policy and research. Also from an ethical point of view it is important to take a critical look at how these terms are used both theoretically and methodologically. To acquire knowledge about children’s experiences and perspectives on their everyday life in different cross-cultural contexts is an ambitious aim that, among other things, requires an ethnographic approach. It is necessary to use multiple methods in research with children in order to get “thick descriptions” and understand their experiences. “Participant observation is a valuable tool to get deeper insight into the ‘unspoken words’, and the complexities of different meaning-making processes. It opens for interpretation of emotions and embodied experiences that are not necessarily conscious to the individual mind” (Kjørholt 2004). The limited use of interviews and the need to combine different methods have been emphasized by many researchers (Clark 2005, Kjørholt et al. 2005, Ennew et al. 2009, Abebe 2009). It is also important to be sensitive to the uniqueness of the person in the particular situation and environment, acknowledging not only the spoken words but trying to grasp emotional dimensions and nuances and being aware of what is left unspoken and is silenced (van Manen 1998).

It is crucial to contextualize children’s voices, and illuminate the interconnectedness between children’s everyday lives and the wider economic, social and political contexts (Morrow

2008, Abebe 2008, Kjørholt 2004). Furthermore, it is also ethically important to differentiate children with regard to gender, social class, age, ethnicity etc. This also requires knowledge of the particular cultures of communication that characterize the (age) group one is researching (Christensen and James 2000). It is important to acknowledge the need to obtain contextual information, to “know how to ask” and to know how to interpret and do the analysis.

Accordingly, the notion of context is underlined in our programme. Examples of studies investigating the interconnectedness between children’s everyday lives, social change and the wider political economy are studies of childhoods in rural Ethiopia (cf. Abebe 2008) and Sudan (Katz 2000). Sometimes analyses of children’s perspectives in a political context can be particularly challenging. One of our former students argues: “Political realities in Lebanon cannot be ignored even when the focus is on children’s everyday lives” (Restan 2010, p 32).

### **BEING A RESEARCHER, BEING A FRIEND?**

The aim of qualitative research is to obtain in-depth knowledge about a particular social phenomenon (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). A qualitative approach implies creating relationships. However, there are of course a variety of different ways of achieving this. It has been argued that creating a relationship of intimacy and trust between the researcher and the informants is crucial, and that in this respect some methods might be better than others (Ennew and Boyden 1997). However, the need to create close relationships with your informants or participants in research is associated with several ethical dilemmas. The ideal of the researcher as neutral,



objective, and distanced from her/his informants is thereby abandoned. In the focus group interviews with the master's students, many of them reflected on the topic of "being a friend" with children as part of the research. One of them expressed it like this:

We should work together with children as friends in order to generate knowledge. It is important in order to respect and recognize children and value their experiences. It is unethical not to avoid using the power position we have as adults and researchers. (Student in a focus group interview).

In the discussion, the meaning of friendship and the ethical implications of being friends with the children were examined. Below is an excerpt of the discussion, revealing reflections on what friendship in the context of research implies:

- What do you mean by being a friend when you are doing research with (or among, cf. Eide et al. 2010) children?
- Well—to me this means respecting them, getting close... (Student 1)
- But we are spending a short time with them. I think it is not possible to be friend in such a short time. (Student 2)
- I do not agree. Being a friend does not depend on time... a person can be close and a friend in a short time—in my experience it takes only a few hours... (Student 1)
- Hm... that's true—it is the same in our countries. (Many students)
- But maybe mixing up roles as a researcher and as a friend may be dangerous... it may be harmful to children... I mean we are

there such a short time, and then we are leaving them... They may feel left alone when we leave... (Student 3)

- But are you sure you are seen as a friend by the children? (Student 2)

- Well... Actually when I think about it, I think they see me as a special friend—a “researcher-friend”—I am both friend and researcher and I think they know the difference (Student 3).

- Maybe a friendly adult they can trust... (Student 4)

- If you know they are at risk, then you have to make sure that there is someone supporting the children when you leave... (Student 5)

From the master’s thesis and focus group interviews, it is clear that, for the students, doing research with children means building trust by spending time and being together, sharing everyday life, giving children moral support in different ways, participating in games and play, sharing meals, talking and sharing thoughts, and more. They are doing fieldwork in different places such as in the community, on the streets, at the marketplace, in their homes, schools, institutional care etc. The relationships between the researchers and the children are dynamic and shifting, moving between different positions, as reflected in the following quote:

In the cattle-herding field I’m their friend, just like them, talking, laughing, playing...

In the home, I’m like their parents. The children listen to stories told by the elders, they don’t talk to me or to other adults. In the school they call me teacher... (PhD student in focus group interview)

## **GETTING CLOSE AND BEING A WITNESS: RESPONSIBILITY AND RECIPROCITY**

Many students experience that they establish close relationships with children with whom they are doing research. That this relationship is also important to the children is reflected in many theses. The following quote from one thesis illuminates how the relationship created trust and feelings of being recognized: “You should be coming every day to see us, you should be with us—we feel nice when you come.....we can’t hide anything to you, you have seen how we live on the streets” (Phiri 2009, p 36 and 44).

As in my encounter with Martha in the office, the students’ research with children can be described as an encounter, being witness to and getting close to children who in many ways are vulnerable because they live in challenging environments such as poverty, orphanhood, war and political violence etc. Their human rights as stated in the UNCRC are far from being fulfilled. As part of their fieldwork students may, for example, be witness to poverty, hunger, sickness, violence, and other difficult life circumstances; police being violent to street children; and bullying and power-differentials between groups of children.

Doing research with or among children challenges the aim of creating reciprocity and mutual relationships. By being involved as informants or participants in research, the children contribute with knowledge and information. However, what do they get in return—here and now, and in a future perspective? In other words: What does the researcher/student give and what kind of knowledge does he/she get in return by being involved in a

relationship with children? Critical reflections are needed, both with regard to the quality of research, the analysis and interpretation of the empirical material you have as part of this particular way of doing research, and the ethical challenges concerning how to prevent children from any harm as part of the research.

### **BEING A RESEARCHER AND A HUMAN BEING: BLURRED BOUNDARIES**

Doing research with children means that boundaries between what it means to be a researcher and what it means to be a friend or a human being are blurred. We may ask if these blurred boundaries contribute to extending the ethical space, in the sense that it also involves ethics related to what it means to be a friend, how to be a good friend, and what moral responsibilities you have as a friend. To me this invites questions and issues pertaining to the ethics of care, the ethics of responsibility, and the ethics of an encounter. As also reported by many of our students, the blurred boundaries for the researcher (student) implied being put in the position of “helper”, and being confronted with expectations from children that the students could support them and solve their problems. According to the students, the many challenges and moral obligations they met could sometimes feel overwhelming, leaving them with unanswered questions related to care, justice and moral responsibilities as human beings. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas uses the expression “the face of the other” to refer to the moral obligations and responsibilities human beings have as part of being human, for recognizing “the other” as a subject in human encounters. To me this implies

moral, emotional and cognitive engagement, awareness and openness in sharing the moment and fate of the other; it also implies reflecting on your responsibilities when it comes to how to promote justice and respect for the other. Furthermore, it implies listening to the voice of the other in a broad sense, recognizing and revealing children's experiences and lives in research texts, though unfortunately not with any promise of solving children's problems. These blurred boundaries make the ethics related to doing research with or among children more complex and complicated than it would otherwise be. In the focus group interviews, the students reflected on how to solve such dilemmas. One topic they addressed was how to create reciprocity in their relationship with their informants. Questions concerning different forms of compensation for the time children allocated to research revealed strong and differing opinions with regard to whether to give and what to give: money, food/meals, school materials such as books, or photos, or clothes.

The ethical dilemmas students felt in combining the role of researcher with that of friend were expressed like this: "You're not just a best friend—you can't promise them that their life will be changed after the master's thesis" (student in focus group interview). Tatek Abebe, who has been doing extensive research among children in rural and urban environments in Ethiopia, expressed the challenges of "saying goodbye" in this way:

Leaving the field left me with complex questions of how to say "goodbye", how I would give "something back" to the children

(and what), how to maintain relationships beyond the research setting, and ways of dissemination and communication. (Abebe 2009, p. 462)

In the focus group interviews too, the students addressed this issue. One of the arguments made was that “[t]oo much emotional attachment may be harmful to them—if they open up and trust you... they might feel rejected and left alone with their vulnerabilities and challenges when you leave.” This topic has also been discussed in many master’s theses. One student argues in her thesis that it is important to have a “closing session” with the children at the end of the fieldwork, inviting them to focus on amusing things, sharing nice experiences and hopes for the future (Restan 2010). Among my own experiences in the field, being connected to children living in poverty and facing very hard life circumstances, is the ethical challenge of being in a privileged position and still left with feelings of helplessness upon leaving them. One example which illustrates this situation is when some children asked me for my mobile phone in order for them to stay in touch after I had left. Leaving them on the street, I was aware that what I could offer them was listening to them, recognition and deep respect for their lives, their vitality, strength, and ways of coping. In addition, I could hope that being with them and sharing their lives for a while could make a small contribution to promoting self respect as well as moments of shared joy in the encounters. As a researcher, in a long-term perspective, the moral responsibility is to develop publications that can contribute to making their lives visible.

### **ETHICAL GUIDELINES: THE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES**

An important question has to do with the place of ethical guidelines in doing research with children in cross-cultural contexts. Do such guidelines represent a necessary and important tool, and if so, what should they contain? The report by Childwatch International reveals a significant difference between researchers in the global North and global South with regard to this. Whereas more than 50 per cent of the researchers in the global North report that national ethical guidelines have a major impact on the ethics they follow when doing research with children, this is not the case for most researchers in the global South (Powell et al. 2011). This finding confirms the experiences of the majority of our students who report that they are unaware of national ethical requirements and guidelines in their countries. The guidelines, which are developed within a global North context, take as a point of departure particular notions of human beings, knowledge, research, privacy, and so on. The concept of informed consent may for example be problematic for a variety of different reasons, such as:

- Non-literacy; knowledge is local and informal, embedded in everyday life and intergenerational relations, learnt by participation in social practices
- Written documents may be seen as dangerous and associated with political authorities and control
- The category of “research” and “researcher” is not part of the vocabulary, or the linguistic and cultural framework

- The danger of creating a distance, preventing the students from having access to the field
- The concept of the child and the human being as an individual is not necessarily appropriate. Human beings in many parts of the world are constructed as part of the extended family system and of collective groups, communities etc.
- The concept of freedom as attached to the individual person. Authority, power and decision- making are unequally distributed in a community, and attached to particular positions within a collective group

Ethical guidelines may be useful, but it is very important to evaluate their relevance critically and adapt to the socio-cultural context in which the research is conducted. The following excerpt illustrates how problematic the concept of informed consent can be:

The village leaders did not give me their consent as immediately as the political administrators. They asked where I was born, who my father was, who my grandfather was, which clan I belonged to, where I was brought up, where I was living, and why I came to their villages. After they deliberated on my identity and understood that I can speak their language, they wanted to know my purpose in their villages. Being satisfied by my answers, they gave me blessings and allowed me to live and move in their villages. (Jirata 2011)

#### **FROM FIXED GUIDELINES TO DYNAMIC ETHICAL SPACES**

Ethical issues and challenges vary and are dependent on and interconnected with the social, economic, political, and cultural



contexts. Whereas the researchers in the global North have their main focus on informed consent, access to the field and an “overly protective ethical review process”, the main ethical challenges for researchers in the global South seem to be what they perceive as cultural beliefs and fear for children’s safety (Powell et al. 2011). Among the major findings in the Childwatch International report is that researchers need “greater access to resources”, such as literature, training and support from colleagues to help guide and inform their research with children (Powell et al. 2011, p 40). Existing national ethical guidelines are important, but not sufficient when doing research with children in cross-cultural contexts. Ginny Morrow argues that “[i]t is difficult for researchers to anticipate what ethical dilemmas will arise during the course of the research, so that seeing ethics as situational and responsive is important” (Morrow 2008, p 56). The experiences of our students underline this point, and the need to be flexible.

Findings presented in the Childwatch International report revealed that researchers in both the global South and global North are influenced by three common factors: (1) their own ethical principles; (2) their previous research experiences; (3) institutional ethics requirements. The authors argue that:

The ways in which researchers respond to the diverse ethical issues they face is therefore determined, to a large extent, by their personal understanding and experiences, and their environmental context. The training received and resources that researchers have access to shape their ethical understanding and practice. (Powell et al. 2011, p 40)

Being aware of this point, and of the responsibility teachers have to create spaces for ethical reflexivity in the encounters with students, therefore represents a core issue.

Situational ethics has also been seen as useful with regard to action-oriented research. It has been argued that ethical issues cannot be predicted by fixed guidelines. Instead, situational ethics aims at “getting insight into the complexities and the different and potentially conflicting interests embedded in a particular situation” (Eikseth and Skeie 2010). It is important to broaden the space for reflexivity at different stages in the research process through a critical review of the ethical guidelines (including considering the concepts and understanding of the child, and research in the socio-political context in which it is developed). By reflexivity I mean the regulation of action which implies a self-critical view on thoughts, values and actions that govern practice (Giddens 1991).

In certain situations, guidelines can be useful as a basis for reflection on ethical issues and the moral responsibilities you have as a researcher. However, the importance of avoiding the potential ethno-centrism of ethical guidelines cannot be overestimated. Furthermore, it is crucial to apply a culture-sensitive approach, conceptually and methodologically.

#### **TEACHING THROUGH DIALOGUE AND THE ETHICS OF AN ENCOUNTER**

[Ethics] entails a moral consideration grounded in respect for local, gendered and socio-spatial constructions of childhood, as well as the need to go beyond acknowledging such complexities to ask how moral and ethical spaces are (re)produced and who they actually serve. (Abebe 2009, p 463)

In line with this approach I want to highlight the importance of extending the ethical space and to include ethical reflections on dissemination and the impact of research on wider groups of children, as well as the broader implications of social research. The critical question of what you are giving back to the children needs to be addressed, both in the immediate encounters and dialogue you are involved in as a researcher and in a long-term perspective related to the dissemination and publication of the results. Included in this is the important relationship between research and policy. One could argue that this in a long term perspective implies the moral responsibility to develop high quality research, contributing to knowledge about children's welfare and their lived experiences, and about the dynamics between social, economic and political changes and childhoods in different parts of the world.

Being involved in research with children in cross-cultural contexts, as well as meeting the students in our master's programme, can be said to entail an ethics of the encounter. In addition to an increased knowledge about the variety of different childhoods as these are lived and experienced in different parts of the world, the encounters with the students have filled me with increased curiosity and a deep respect for the richness of human life. The need for teaching by dialogue is crucial in order to inspire new research and contribute to improving children's lives and welfare in different parts of the world. In order to develop appropriate research-ethical "tools" for the students, there is still a need for more knowledge about children's lives in different cultural contexts.

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## *Anthropological field experiences from work with children in natural settings on three continents*

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Looking back at my research interests focusing on children and their life worlds, processes of socialization and the construction of meaning have been two central concepts. This needs to be clarified. First, inspired by E. H. Erikson (1978, 1982), I view socialization as processes that continue throughout our lives. This is an important point because to a degree it lessens some of the differences between children and adults. Thus differences in, for example, frustration management, creativity, honesty and trust can be analysed as issues of degree, psychological maturity, context and emphasis. The way I read some current child researchers' new insights, socialization studies are at least somewhat outdated, because these studies neither ascribe agency to children nor conceptualize them as competent social

participants. Thus James, Jenkins and Prout (1998) seem not to ascribe much merit to a focus on socialization processes. Put bluntly, these scholars find that developmental psychology may be misleading when it comes to gaining insight into children's life-worlds. Because according to socialization theory, children are unfinished adults, they argue that:

[the] child is necessarily considered to be incompetent or to have only incomplete, unformed or proto-competencies. Therefore any research following from such a model cannot attend to the everyday world of children, or their skills in interaction and world-view, except in terms of generating a diagnosis for remedial action. (p. 25)

It may be true that many anthropological studies of children were framed in terms such as growing up, becoming, and socialization patterns, and often the emphasis was on social control, obedience, play activity as education, puberty rituals etc. I do, however, see their characterization of these socialization studies as vastly exaggerated. Another problem with the argumentation of these authors may be an apparent lack of understanding of the need to combine psychological, sociological and anthropological insights when the goal is to understand the worlds of young people. It is my claim that anthropologists, including those making at least a partial use of socialization models based on developmental theory have, indeed attended to the everyday world of the children they have studied (Mead 1928, 1930; Montagu 1978; Wisner 1987, LeVine and New 2008, and more). Furthermore, children's skills and competence in interaction



have been thoroughly documented, although their world views have not been focused on in particular. Studies of socialization placed few barriers to an insight into children's life worlds and did not deny children agency. We should perhaps substantiate the claim by paying attention to what current child development researchers say about socialization. Actually, well-established definitions do not deviate much from well-known previous praxis. Through processes of socialization, children develop the competencies and skills needed for adequate adaptation to their society. This training includes, for example, basic knowledge, values, and behaviours judged to be important in their society. What I want to stress in the present context is that "[s]ocialization itself should be viewed as a dynamic process in and between different relationships, in which the child in its turn acts as an active agent" (Jávo 2010:56). It is not a focus on socialization as such that may hinder a research focus on children's experiences, meaning-making and interaction patterns, but an exaggerated need for generalizations and adults' need for predictability of children's behaviour.

A few words about meaning-making: inspired by recent narrative theory developed by researchers from different disciplines, such as Ricoeur (1980) in philosophy, Bruner (1990, 2002) and Polkinghorne (1988) in psychology, Smith (2003) and Lawler (2008) in sociology, and Basso (1996) and Geertz (1973) in anthropology, we may again narrow the presumed gap between children and adults. In the present context, these gaps are understood as "conceptual spaces and real places into which powerful demarcations do not travel well" (Tsing 2005:175). By implication, a fixed

dichotomy between children and adults remains interesting in a limited number of contexts. Paying attention to gaps, we find that social and cognitive processes are fundamentally shaped in the same way by most people regardless of their age and gender. However, this does not suggest that age and gender do not have an important impact for interaction and identity constructions, nor that individuals conceptualize their life worlds in the same way. Narrative theory claims that we all construct our life worlds and the identity of self and others by means of narrative work. These narratives are based on “facts” and fantasies; when shared with significant others they become the truth although this truth may be contested by other narratives. Bruner (1990) argues what is particularly relevant in the present context, namely, that the development of narrative skills consists of more than learning what to say or how to present oneself. It is equally important to learn how, where and to whom communicative messages are most successfully uttered. This parallels Goffman’s theorizing about social roles, the importance of contexts and settings for social interaction, impression management and self presentation (Goffman 1959). Luckily, there is a huge toolkit developed by psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists which is well suited for the study of children.

The way I see it, a combined focus on socialization and narratives directs attention to some very important insights, also when it comes to the study of children. Both socialization and storytelling are social acts that involve interaction on many levels. Intergenerational communication is just as important as peer group interaction. Children and adults alike are strategic,

narrative-telling beings (Broch 2011). They adjust their comportment, what they do and say to goals and to the context of interaction. As researchers, we should not be naïve when it comes to the study of children, but give them credit for being competent in the skills of narration and impression management.

In the following glimpses from anthropological fieldwork with children among Canadian Hare Indians, two different island communities in Indonesia, and a Norwegian setting are presented. This is to indicate how a growing interest in children's life worlds developed into the theoretical stance described above. Finally, these fieldwork experiences provide the framework for the reflections about ethics in research with children that end the article.

### **HARE INDIAN CHILDREN**

When I set out for 15 months of fieldwork among Hare Indians on the Mackenzie River in 1972, children and children's lives or doings were not part of my research plan. However, I had not stayed there long before the interaction between children and adults caught my attention. The almost ever-present children influenced many interaction patterns. How children of different gender and age were treated, that is controlled and sometimes subtly encouraged, surely reflected many basic Hare Indian values. I was surprised to learn how differently the Indians reared their children from familiar experiences of socialization and ideas about children's needs in Norwegian contexts. Shaming and mockery of both the younger and older children by their parents and other adults were common. In the summer tent camp, two to

three-year-old children would sometimes run about dressed in only a tee shirt. Then it is not long before the women start to tease the half-naked boys. They point at their penises and shout: “look at his dooly, how funny, look at it, so tiny it is”. In the beginning the boys laugh along with the women, but after a while they feel uncomfortable due to the unwanted attention and put on shorts. To a young anthropologist it was also heartbreaking to watch adults eating some goodies, perhaps drinking coke from a can in the tent and then asking a girl or boy aged between three and five if she/he wanted some. The child would nod and express eagerness to get some.

This would go on for some time, and when the child finally got the can, it would be empty. If the child showed signs of disappointment or started to sulk she was sternly corrected and told to smarten up and not behave like an idiot. It should be stressed that at other times the children got their share without any questions or fuss. Praise for children’s (or adults’) achievements or help was seldom heard. Braggarts were scolded and all self-glorification frowned upon. For instance, a twelve year old boy came home proud and full of himself after having won a running competition in the village. Inside there were many people of different ages. No one paid him any attention, but he continued to inform them about the race. Then his grandmother looked up: “Shut up, stupid, stop bragging. You should know that everybody in the village knows that you won, no need to tell everybody what they know”. Behaviour was harshly corrected, and both physical and psychological means were in common use. Neither the Indians nor the observing anthropologist ever

doubted that children's behaviour was intentional, purposeful or goal-directed and influenced interaction between children as well as interaction between children and adults. Hence the social science revelation that children have agency (regardless of how we define the concept) is not a new insight. Children everywhere seem to gain an early competence in the art of contextual behaviour adaptation. (Testing of social rules and regulations seems to be a component of children's activities everywhere.) The rationale behind much socialization is based on the idea that children are individual actors and that social values can be taught and learned. Living in a household and taking part in Hare Indian sociality, it became evident to me that also younger and older children, girls and boys, should be given field-note attention. I never shifted my primary research focus, but the field experiences ignited an interest in socialization studies. What are the consequences of culturally constituted and other different socialization practices? (How is socialization reflected in adult behaviour?)

During my stay among the Hare Indians, the life situation of native children emerged as an interesting topic to investigate, and notes were gathered labelled under headlines such as: attitudes towards birth and family planning; infants and toddlers; middle age and older children; distribution of tasks according to age and gender; play activities; school-related behaviour; from child to adult (Broch 1976). Although the children's voices were heard in the field, both in interaction among themselves, for instance during play and in encounters with adults, the data produced were primarily presented as descriptive documentation. This was

before much effort was placed on hermeneutics, experience-near interpretations and a focus on the meaning of meanings.

#### **BONERATE, INDONESIA**

I spent most of 1978 doing fieldwork in Miang Tuu village on Bonerate Island in the Sea of Flores, Indonesia. The island extends over approximately 70 square kilometres with a total population of some 5,400 people. Miang Tuu consisted of 196 residents living in 43 households and 46 houses (all figures from 1978). With experiences of socialization studies from the Hare Indian encounter in my luggage, the differences were striking. The Hare claimed that young children (approximately from 3-5 years old) are smart, they understand what you tell them and they are physically punished when disobedient or behaving disagreeably. Miang Tuu villagers claim that young children are stupid, that there is no use in giving them detailed explanations of, for instance, why things they do are wrong. “Never do that; stop it; don’t do like that” are typical commands, and it is never explained why acts are forbidden.

When children all the same seriously misbehave, for instance when girls or boys younger than approximately 5-6 years old are unattended at the beach or a too young boy has climbed to the top of a coconut palm to fetch a nut (girls never climb palms!), their parents are publicly threatened with punishment because they did not control the child. This reprimand is in itself a punishment by means of public condemnation. It is possible to argue that this is also a punishment for the offending young children because they learn early on about the social relevance of shame. In spite

of the fact that the youngsters are not held responsible for their deeds, they observe that they inflict sadness or harm on a parent. All physical punishment is ruled out because it is regarded as a shameful act that also disrupts valued village harmony. No Miang Tuu children went to school during my stay on the island. This, together with little focus on physical age (in fact no one knew her or his exact age in the village), resulted in the view that a generalized norm for age-proper development of skills made little sense. When children were approximately three years old their parents had already lost track of their age. This had the consequence that no one seemed to care about when children started to walk or talk and exhibit other skills which in many other groups are registered as signs of a normal development. “We all go through life at our own pace, some take longer, others a shorter time to learn things and in the end it all, more or less, levels out”, I was told.

This and similar statements combined with observed socialization practices aroused my interest in finding out as much as possible about prevailing cultural ideas about children and child socialization patterns among Miang Tuu residents. I was also puzzled by the different personalities and attitudes expressed by individual children and adults in the village. It would have been possible to make general claims about local comportment and interaction, but then these claims would neither be experience-near nor reflect the various children’s life situations. To follow up my curiosity it became necessary to investigate household compositions, sibling relations and, not least, the gender and birth order of siblings. Whether the oldest child in

a household was a boy or a girl seemed to play a significant role in the children's identity development, ascribed tasks around the house and acquisition of gender roles. What psychologists have told us: that no children within a household experience what is going on in the exactly the same way and that they live in somewhat different worlds, proved to be a useful insight (see also Lewis 1979). Likewise, when children were of approximately the same age, but living in different households labelled by different social positions, it became difficult to ignore how such factors contributed to their interaction patterns and also how individual children fantasized their futures. It is noteworthy that differences in children's life worlds are so clearly observed in such a small community. When children play together in Miang Tuu, they bring differing cultural capitals to their encounters and do not share identical experiences of what is happening. The social status of adult villagers is reflected onto their children. The experiences of village life made multifaceted impacts on the anthropologist. It was striking how different the life situations of children were within the particular households that became my home as well as theirs, and how clearly children's opportunities and social capital were distributed among the 43 households in the village. Where most social scientists and researchers of children's worlds currently seem to stress the importance of acknowledging boys' and girls' agency, the Miang Tuu ethnography clearly demonstrates that this agency is unevenly distributed. Even in such a tiny community of children, some were leaders, socially mature, competent at most of the things they were doing and well equipped with relevant local cultural



capital. Other children stayed in the socio-cultural peripheries much like muted group members.

The experiences from this fieldwork resulted in the monograph *Growing Up Agreeably. Bonerate Childhood Observed* (Broch 1990). The intention was twofold: first, I wanted to describe what it was like to grow up in a tiny, relatively isolated village on the periphery of the Indonesian republic. My aim was to give an ethnographic account of Miang Tuu children—how girls and boys play; which tasks they are assigned by their parents; how they are reared and educated by peers, older children, parents and other adults; what their hopes are for the future. Second, it was my hope that the work would be useful to those who might be interested in socialization processes in a cross-cultural context. Perhaps what I found to be a community marked by gender equality and little attention devoted to normative ideas about children's ageappropriate behaviour and development of skills would be of interest?

The idea of the possibility to produce experience-near ethnographies, backed by hermeneutic strategies for analysis, grew within some anthropological circles from the late 1970s and onward (Geertz 1973). It may be that to grasp the experiences of others is ultimately impossible. Like the holistic approach to the study of social phenomena in anthropology, this is an ideal goal to strive towards. In order to grasp, understand or interpret the experiences of others, it is necessary to comprehend the involved complexity of meaning-making, including the relevance of diverse motivating factors. Although experiences are sometimes expressed and narrated as shared, they are basically

individual. Experiences are never totally uninformed by previous experiences, the present setting and context, and are often related to an assessed future. Experiences are also necessarily emotionally charged (Chodorow 1999). Thus, to reach an understanding of experiences we need to combine social, psychological and cultural theory. This focus on experience-near ethnography naturally included research with children.

#### **ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITH NORWEGIAN CHILDREN**

In a study, lasting seven handball seasons, of children (8-16 years old) of both genders who played European handball, one primary goal was to try to grasp how the children felt about the activity (Broch 1995, 2003). Two facts soon became clear: first, the handball activities had great social impact away from exclusive handball settings; second, formal and semi-formal group conversations and interviews with the children provided rather unreliable information about feelings and personal experiences, except for some viewpoints from the socially top-ranked team players. A question like “Do you have friends (many or some) on the team?” led to cultural clichés like “Oh yes, we are all friends”, or naming of the most popular girls or boys on the team. After all, having but few friends or none is stigmatizing in most Norwegian contexts. There is something wrong with someone who has few or no friends.

As a researcher of children’s handball searching for experience-near insights, one needed to participate in different settings, in different contexts, listen to what was said when and to whom, observe non-verbal signs on and around the court and join various

small group constellations. How difficult it often is to discover what is really happening in interaction with ramifying social and psychological consequences, is usefully shown by Simmons in her *Odd Girl Out* (2002). What she discovered was the same as I did during and after some handball matches. Social relations between same-team girls (and boys) are neither always as they appear, nor as the girls are likely to tell you. A thirteen-year-old girl came out of the cloakroom upset after her team had won a match. Everyone could see that she had been crying. The head coach and her parents who were present asked what was the matter. The girl told them that everything was fine, she was all right and happy they had won the match. However, before the girls had gone for their shower, I had overheard a conversation between this girl and the two stars of the team. The two leading girls told her that in spite of the fact that she had scored a goal, she should stop shooting and leave goal-scoring to the better players. Besides, they told her, when she made her successful jump shot, she just looked ugly, much like a toad. When I later told her parents and the head coach about the episode and that measures should be taken to stop such behaviour, I was met with disbelief. The top girls were such nice, caring and considerate people, what I observed had to be nothing but sympathetic teasing! Further studies indicated that this was not necessarily the case. Social relations are not always what they look like. This applies to interaction between adults as well as children. All the same, we tend to interpret much interaction according to preconceived attitudes (often called experience-based knowledge) towards the actors involved.

This may be obvious, and if it is, it should always be taken into account when children are studied in age and/or gender-homogenous groups as well as in intergenerational settings. The children's relations both with parents and with older and younger siblings often account for some behavioural specificity on the court.

Self-confidence or lack of faith in skills and talents, envy, pride, rivalry, support and ideas about outcomes of cooperation are according to Sanders (2004) all strongly influenced by child, parents and sibling interaction in and around the home. Thus, in order to reach an experience-near understanding of child players of handball, it became necessary to accept that (1) the experiences were diverse (some children were ambivalent, others wished not to be there, and some thrived); (2) sociality from the handball arena carried over into many other settings, including school arenas; (3) relations and patterns of interaction from other arenas were brought into the sports context; (4) children's handball experiences should not be interpreted in isolation from various other social contexts; and (5) dominant players are often, but not always, the most popular children within the team. These boys and girls rule much of what is happening on the court during training and even more so at handball matches. They are also rich in handball cultural capital, they are the ones coaches listen to, and they tend to subdue many team companions. Children's sports are often thoroughly idealized by parents, coaches, sport administrators and the media. Children who participate in sports supposedly develop physical skills and cooperation towards common goals, gain many friends, learn to win and

lose with good spirit etc. However, as shown above, far from all children participating in organized sport events thrive or gain positive identity feedback. More studies focusing on ideology and praxis combined with experience-near interpretations of team behaviour are surely needed.

### **RETURNING TO INDONESIA**

A children's perspective came into focus when my two children Tuva (14 years old) and Trygve (11 years old) accompanied me on two months of fieldwork on Timpaus Island in Indonesia. Previously, I had been to the island for an eight month period, also studying local patterns of child socialization. As should be unmistakable by now, current anthropological studies of socialization conceptualize children as competent, mindful individuals acting within socio-cultural structures they adhere to and sometimes manage to circumvent.

This short fieldwork took place in 1994 and resulted in the book *Jangan Lupa. An experiment in cross cultural understanding* (Broch 2002). The subtitle reads: *The effort of two Norwegian children and Timpaus villagers to create meaning in interaction*. On Timpaus, as in most other places, children and adults together constitute social webs of interaction. Even when adults are not present in person, they are usually nearby in the children's thoughts and vice versa. Studying children generally without reference to child-adult interactions means disregarding important experiences, and perhaps especially so in small communities like Timpaus (390 residents). Anthropologists who have brought their children to the field generally narrate successful

experiences, stating that their own children open many doors to new insights. This is because they often make friends with children their own age and accordingly provide access to a wide-  
ned social network for their researcher parents. However, it is also well documented that the children of anthropologists may encounter frustrating experiences during their parents' fieldwork (see for instance Cassel ed. 1987, Broch 2002).

On Timpaus, the research focus was on children's and adults' experiences of each other. Some methodological strategies should be mentioned. Trygve and Tuva had agreed to write down their experiences and thoughts about Timpaus and village life every day, thus all three of us worked in the field. My children agreed to let me use their dairies and expressed that they liked the idea of being my assistants. We talked about how we experienced what happened in the village, and I served as an interpreter when needed. My further knowledge of the two children's previous experiences informed my analysis of why and how they reacted in the ways they did in this unfamiliar Indonesian setting. Without that background, many interpretations of social reactions and meaning production would have been impossible. What about the empathy we thought we discovered among our hosts, how did they understand and find resonance (Wikan 1992) in common interaction with their guests? How did the Timpaus peers of Trygve and Tuva experience their encounters with the foreigners? In that context it was particularly interesting to listen to how adult islanders interpreted the self-presentation of especially somewhat older boys and girls (14-16 years old) who communicated with the Norwegian children. Often, Tuva was told by

our hosts that she should not believe what some of the local girls told her because they were just showing off, trying to impress her. Often too, apparently the Norwegian children, Miang Tuu children, and adults relied on interpretations of nonverbal signs, including efforts at empathetic interpretation of each other's expressions of emotions. Asking questions about feelings and meaning made little sense in the village, as Indonesians are not accustomed to talking much about feelings. Tuva and Trygve are used to communicating about how they feel, but are also often quite strategic when they talk about it. During my first fieldwork on Timpaus, the islanders claimed that they never experienced envy or jealousy among their children. Yet when Tuva and Trygve started to quarrel, our hosts readily told them that they should not feel jealousy towards each other. Envy and jealousy would hurt them, and even other people if village harmony was broken. At the same time the Norwegian children were told that there was no need to feel ashamed, because everyone had felt the power of envy. What was wrong in this context was that they had publicly shown their feelings, an emotional display Timpaus children learn to suppress at an early age (Broch 2002).

Studies of sibling relations in different cultures are few (Nuckolls 1993, Sanders 2004). This is strange, considering the lasting attachments that are often formed between brothers and sisters. These relations are not always without friction. Yet it is interesting how parents interpret and respond to disagreements among siblings. Sibling caretakers are the norm both at Bonerate and Timpaus. This is work that the young caretakers sometimes find burdensome, but at the same time the responsibility they

are delegated may invoke pride and a feeling of being important. The duties of young child carers may appear more important and purposeful to the youngsters than, let us say, keeping one's own room tidy in a modern western society (Whiting & Whiting 1975). It is also argued that child caretakers learn to balance different sets of demands: they must understand the complex local rules of child management, they must interpret the behaviour of the children they are responsible for, and they must postpone or find ways to fulfill their own needs. Young caretakers are usually less predictable than adult caretakers (Wisner & Gallimore 1977, Mead 1928). Both at Bonerate and Timpaus it was observed that the youngest children receive somewhat rougher treatment from their own siblings than from other caretakers.

The work from Timpaus gives examples of how not only adults, but also children engage in impression management (Goffman 1959). In the analysis and interpretation of children's (and in the present context also adults') experiences, shared multicultural encounters and communication, I found it necessary to combine cultural, sociological and psychological insights.

Much of what we think we know about children, including what is best for them, has been based on information gathered from studies in Europe and North America, some of it politically motivated in terms of solving pressing social problems. Theorizing children, their rights, needs, and what is best for them is of course important. These are difficult questions, and the answers produced often appear too simplistic. A study of schoolchildren and their mothers in three different neighbourhoods in New York (Kusserow 1999) clearly shows that these matters are not



straightforward. Child welfare planners need to take into account the present and probable social milieu where the children they wish to help today will most likely live their future lives. If we continue to refine our skills at locating both psychological and significant cultural elements in socialization processes and then manage to account for the interconnections between these factors, we should be better able to grasp important differences in life situations and goals adjusted to particular cultural and sub-cultural worlds. There are few indications that an ideal society will emerge in the near future. Thus, we must adjust to real life worlds. To reach such a broad understanding, which allows different ideas and values to prosper, more information and research is needed about how children grow, develop and are socialized in environments and cultures that differ from those where most of our research on children has been carried out so far. And equally important, these studies should be multi-situated, because we know that children (like adults) may change responses to questions and alter their narratives, goals and even discourses about who they are, their goals and the reported trouble they experience according to contexts and settings.

#### **REFLECTIONS ABOUT ETHICS IN RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN**

There are important differences of topics, goals, purposes, and contexts in social science research on and with children. In the framework of this article I am not addressing pressing ethical standards and problems such as, for instance, how to accommodate unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors so as to ensure the best possible sustainable life in a new country. There are

instances when publicized knowledge and information gathered from children may influence their lives in tangible, even negative ways. In much applied research, the ethical guidelines have to be firm to protect many different subjects from the consequences of unfavourable information. (See Jason Hart's contribution to this volume).

In the present context, the focus is on anthropological methodology, strategies and ethics when the purpose of investigations is basic research. Here too there are, of course, ethical norms and standards to follow. The children, their parents and other involved persons must be given an adequate, informative orientation about the proposed research project, its methods and intended outcomes. All participants must give their consent before the research begins. If or when some persons refuse to participate, that decision must be respected. This is, however, not as straightforward as it may seem. Not only children may have difficulties in understanding how a research project will be carried out and seeing clearly the possible results and conclusions of the analytic work. Informants sometimes reject proposed anonymity. Children, their parents and other adults may say that they prefer to appear with their own names in all scholarly texts produced. Thus, at times it will be the researcher's decision to overrule particular wishes when this is considered better for the informants. It can happen that the researchers have to protect the informants from themselves and their understanding of research participation and its implications.

Most important when it comes to ethics is the imperative that ethnographic depictions, interpretations and analytic

conclusions should never be harmful to the children (and other informants) who have participated in the study. The much celebrated anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes experienced a heartbreaking revisit to the field, many years after her monograph on socialization practices and village life in a rural community in Ireland was published. She had carefully selected pseudonyms both for the community she studied and all the residents she had worked with.

Her book, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* (2001) had, however, become a bestseller and rapidly the village and many of her informants were identified both by insiders and outsiders. When Scheper-Hughes met with what she thought were old friends for what she had hoped would be a happy reunion, they told her to get out of their community, clearly expressing that the villagers did not want to see her. “Perhaps what you wrote about us was all true, but you made us look ignorant and like bad parents. Why did you never write about the positive sides of our community and village life too?” she was asked. In an expanded edition of her book Scheper-Hughes reflects that the villagers were right, she could have done things differently and would do so if she were to make a restudy. Finally she comments on the use of pseudonyms. She had come to the insight that what you cannot write openly should not be written! (Scheper-Hughes 2001). Returning to my own fieldwork experiences and consequent analyses of ethnographic material involving children, I have seldom confronted young or older research participants with most of my conclusions. Both in Canada and Indonesia, I was simply told by my collaborators that they were not interested,

but liked the idea that their communities and ways of life were exposed to the world. They explained that it was a matter of trust. They expected that I would only report what I had seen and heard. The names and locations of the field sites where research was carried out in Canada and Indonesia were not hidden in research reports and other publications. However, some people's names were occasionally changed and sometimes omitted when an individual's statements or particular or odd behaviour could easily be identified. I knew well that neither the Canadian Indians nor the Indonesian villagers would read the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of their community lives.

Today, this might be different, because of the new information technology. But in the early 1970s, few Hare Indians read books, and Bonerate was on the periphery of Indonesia. Few of the villagers could read texts in their own language, and no one had any foreign language comprehension. Still, all texts were written with that in mind. I would have liked them to read the texts, with the hope that they would have been pleased even where they did not agree with my conclusions. This was all very different when doing fieldwork in Norway and among child handball players. An ethical problem may be considered inherent to many anthropological investigations, when the objective is to scrutinize the relationship between ideology and praxis, or comparing what you say you do with what is actually done. The children, their parents and coaches were all informed about the anthropological study that was to take place. After a while, however, most of the children forgot about it, and they were not particularly interested in the project. Sometimes the most interesting information came up when the

children were obviously paying no attention to the researcher in their midst. Some days (and the project lasted through several years) it was puzzling to drive children to and from handball matches. They not only seemed to forget all about the researcher at the wheel, but also that there was an adult present in the car. It was often in these and similar settings that the most interesting information, for instance about peer relations, was revealed to the anthropologist. I did not interrupt the children's conversation to remind them that the anthropologist would write down their comments when he got back home. What I have done, however, is to apply fictitious names to handball clubs and all children, coaches and parents involved.

Obviously, ethical norms are needed in most social science research and especially when "defenceless" children are involved. We always have to ask ourselves and our colleagues if the planned research with children is worthwhile and for what reasons. And yet it would hamper much-needed research on children and their life worlds and meaning production if ethical norms and regulations were to hinder insight, for example because the stated purpose of an act is analysed as differing from its most likely motivation. It is not a viable research strategy always to ask our research participants if they agree with the scientific interpretations. Yet research ethics are important and must be followed to protect the integrity of research participants. Generalizations and anonymity are applicable means to secure ethical standards, but not always enough. In the end, ethics in all research should be based on common sense. The insoluble problem is, however, that common sense is unevenly distributed also among scholars and researchers.

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*Ethics tensions in research with children  
across cultures, within countries:  
A UK Perspective*

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Within societies that are ethnically and culturally diverse, almost any study that involves children and families needs to attend to culture and ethnicity. Specific ethics considerations arise in addressing ethnicity—whether a study encompasses diverse ethnic, religious or cultural groups, or only involves a single ethnic group (including majority ethnic groups such as “white British”). These considerations apply whether or not ethnicity is a key focus of the research. This chapter will address the ethics tensions involved in conducting research within ethnically and culturally diverse societies. I will begin by drawing on the example of the UK context, considering the patterns of ethnic diversity within its population. Following a discussion of contexts, I turn to

concepts, to consider how understandings of ethnicity can inform reflection, and practical strategies, for working with ethics across the research process.

### **ATTENDING TO ETHNICITY IN STUDIES WITHIN COUNTRIES**

There is a substantial academic literature on ethics in research with children and young people in low income or economically developing countries (e.g. Young and Barrett, 2001; Molyneux, Peshu and Marsh, 2005; McGregor, 2006; Harper, 2007; Morrow, 2009), along with ethics guidance on this topic from learned societies and research funders.<sup>1</sup> For example, The Wellcome Trust, a major UK funder, provides detailed online guidance on research with people in low or middle income countries, emphasising the need to be aware of special cultural and social considerations, and to recognise that the concept of research may not be readily understood by participants, or may be confused with direct service provision. Such considerations are relevant to research within affluent countries too, but it is less common for ethics guidance explicitly to address culture, religion and ethnicity in within-country research. To take one example, in the UK in 2010, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)<sup>2</sup> published its revised Framework for Research Ethics. This document highlights cultural considerations in research conducted outside the UK, but does not specifically

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1 See for example, the Association of Social Anthropologists: <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml> or the Wellcome Trust: <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Policy/Policy-and-position-statements/WTD015295.htm> (accessed 24 April 2011).

2 The main UK social science research funding body.

address the ethics of working across cultures in research located within the UK.

What does this mean for the ways in which researchers understand and negotiate ethics in research that spans ethnic, religious or cultural groups within a society? Arguably, studies that are purposely focused on studying specific ethnic, religious or cultural groups may more readily attend to these aspects of their populations than those which simply “happen” to span diverse groups, where this is not the main focus of the work. In within-country research, can ethnic and cultural sensitivity be assumed to be embedded within key ethics principles, such as those relating to informed consent and avoidance of harm? The ESRC Framework does advise that ethics committees should aim to be representative of ethnic diversity in the population, advice that is probably intended to ensure that the ethics considerations of work across cultural or ethnic groups are routinely addressed. However, the lack of explicit attention to these specific considerations could mean they are rendered invisible when considering the ethics of research that is not purposely focused on ethnicity, religion or culture.

### **CONCEPTUALISING ETHNICITY**

It is common practice in social science to classify people according to concepts of “race”, ethnicity, skin colour, cultural origin or ancestry, or country of descent, but classification is not straightforward. Categories are not universally agreed upon; for example, there is considerable international variation in census questions on ethnicity and related topics (Simpson and Akinwale,

2007; Morning, 2008). In the United Kingdom, for example, national census data has recorded “ethnic group” since 1991, with religion recorded since 2001. Ethnic group is self-assigned, chosen by the respondent from a list of 16 categories (including an “other” option) (Office of National Statistics, 2010). Aspinall (2009) argued that the UK census categories for classifying ethnicity began with a concern to redress discrimination based on colour, and this motivation is reflected in UK census categories (e.g. “white UK”). However, the picture is more complex than this statement suggests. Gunaratnam (2007) criticised an appetite for “technical fixes” that neglect the ethical and methodological complexities of classifying ethnicity, driven by a policy context which seeks to “simplify, objectify, and tame the meanings and effects of ethnicity and difference” (op. cit., p147).

Ethnic groupings are not fixed categories of difference, but are complex, dynamic and context-dependent. Equally, ethnicity encompasses multiple different aspects, and there is a need to acknowledge intersectionality: “the intersecting relations of social class, racialisation, ethnicisation and sexuality as well as gender” (Phoenix, 2009, p102). In studies of childhood, participants’ positioning and identity as children is a key additional intersecting factor. These conceptual complexities inevitably incur ethics considerations, which have been well discussed elsewhere (e.g., Gunaratnam, 2007; Morning, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to consider how researchers can best ensure ethical practice throughout the process of researching ethnically diverse populations, drawing on the example of research in the UK. First, it is useful to consider the nature and extent of ethnic diversity within

the UK, by drawing on UK census classifications and considering the complexity therein.

### **THE UK CONTEXT**

National census data show that the UK is a diverse and changing society. The most recent available estimates for England and Wales show that 89 per cent of the population were categorised as “white”, with the remainder belonging to other groups.<sup>3</sup> These data are in line with patterns for the UK as a whole, according to the most recent published census data (2001). White people continue to be the largest overall census grouping in the UK, but this group is itself diverse, encompassing those defining themselves as “white UK” and people amalgamated into an “other white” category, including the UK’s long-established white Irish population (which is declining), as well as “white other”. This last grouping is growing, partly as a result of migration from other EU countries, and it is now larger than any single minority ethnic group in the UK.

A further change is in the proportion of children of mixed parentage, which is the fastest-growing category of children in the UK: there are now more children aged under 15 years who have one white and one black Caribbean parent in the UK than who have two black Caribbean parents (Owen, 2005). However, populations are not evenly spread, and minority ethnic groups are more likely to live in urban areas. Perhaps not surprisingly,

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3 Office for National Statistics: Current Estimates - Population Estimates by Ethnic Group Mid-2007 (experimental), accessed 24 April 2011: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=14238>

the London region is the most ethnically diverse: at the time of the 2001 census it was home to more than three-quarters of the country's total black African population, as well as six out of ten of the black Caribbean population, half the Bangladeshi population, and one in three of the white Irish population (Forsyth and Gardener 2006).

### **INTERSECTING ETHICS: ETHNICITY AND RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN**

The importance of attending to the intersectionality of ethnicity with other aspects of identity means taking account of participants' position and identity as children, as well as their ethnicity or culture. The ethics principles that have been derived for research with adults—such as ensuring freely given fully informed consent, and the right to withdraw from research participation—apply equally to children. However, Morrow (2008) noted four additional provisos that apply more specifically to research involving children:

- children's competencies, perceptions and frameworks of reference, which may differ according to factors including—but not limited to—their age, and which are different from those of adults;
- children's potential vulnerability to exploitation in interaction with adults, and adults' specific responsibilities towards children;
- the differential power relationships between adult researcher and child participant; and

- the role of adult gatekeepers in mediating access to children, with concomitant ethical implications in relation to informed consent.

In the UK, children under the age of 18 years are legally minors, but there is no explicit requirement in law for adult consent to children's participation in research. Nonetheless, legal frameworks such as the Fraser Guidelines, based on the Gillick Ruling (Gillick [1985] 3 All ER 423)—which are intended for clinical treatment, and not for research—often inform understandings of requirements for adult consent to child participation (Boddy and Oliver, 2010). As Alderson (2007, p2273) observed, such debates about minors' consent can appear to be “less concerned with children's rights than with adults' freedoms”.

These provisos may have different implications across ethnic or cultural groups—for example, they may depend on culturally located constructions of children's autonomy. Morrow's reminder of the role of adult gatekeepers raises an additional consideration: children live within families, and there is a need to ensure ethical practice towards parents (or other responsible adults) as well as children.

#### **INTERSECTING ETHICS: NORMALISED ABSENCE AND PATHOLOGISED PRESENCE**

Phoenix (e.g., 1987; Phoenix and Husain 2007) has written of the “normalised absence/pathologised presence” of ethnicity in research with children and families, observing that

[m]inority ethnic families are ignored when normalised, unproblematic issues are being studied, but are focused on when issues seen as problematic are being examined. In addition, differences are frequently interpreted as deficiencies or deviations from the norm by minority ethnic parents and children. (Phoenix and Husain 2007, p. 8)

At heart, these are ethics considerations. The concept of normalised absence indicates a need to ensure that research in ethnically diverse societies includes the voices of participants from minority ethnic groups. Minority ethnic groups tend to be under-represented in research, to the extent that national representative studies such as the UK Millennium Cohort Study over-sample minority ethnic groups, to address lower response rates and higher attrition rates, compared to the sample as a whole (Plewis 2007). Failure to attend to potential barriers to participation—such as language or literacy, or understandings of research—may act to silence minority ethnic voices, and hence maintain the status quo by normalising (and so privileging) majority ethnic perspectives. This last point raises an interesting question about the purpose of research ethics, and the extent to which the right to participation (and hence an inclusive research design) is seen as ethically important.

There is a well-established tension in discussions of research ethics—especially when concerning children—between protection and participation (e.g. Alderson, 2007; Boddy and Oliver, 2010; Powell et al., 2011). As Maguire (2005) argued, these are questions of “who gets to speak after all and whose voices are heard, recognised, or silenced”—questions of normalised absence



of some children's voices. However, Powell and colleagues (2011) rightly argue that there is no essential conflict between children's right to be protected and their right to have a voice; rather it is a question of balance. A similar balance might be found in applying the principle of freely given consent, which can be seen to refer to the individual's right to choose whether or not to take part. Protective ethics discourses emphasise the individual right to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from research. Within a participatory ethics framework, it might instead be argued that when a research design acts to exclude certain groups, informed consent is undermined because some potential participants lose the freedom to make the choice to agree to take part.

This literature suggests that the risks of normalised absence are multiplied for children from minority ethnic groups, when over-protective discourses of childhood coincide with the tendency to exclude or under-represent minority ethnic perspectives in within-country research. When working in societies with ethnically or culturally diverse populations, this perspective implies that researchers have a particular ethical responsibility to ensure the accessibility of their research to children from minority ethnic groups.

The concept of pathologised presence is an ethics concern because research should avoid harm—in this case, the harm of stigma or prejudice for children and families from minority ethnic groups. Phoenix and Husain (2007) commented on the tendency for research involving majority ethnic and minority ethnic groups to treat the majority ethnic group as the norm against which other families are (often unfavourably) compared.

Such comparisons are additionally problematic because of the intersection of ethnicity with other factors. Family structures differ across ethnic groups, with concomitant implications for normative understandings of “family” (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). In the 2001 UK census, for example, there were higher rates of lone parenthood among families categorised as black or black British or as of African-Caribbean and white mixed parentage than in the rest of the population (Connolly and Raha, 2006).

A key structural variable in this context is socio-economic disadvantage. The UK has substantially higher levels of child poverty among minority ethnic groups than in the white British majority ethnic population, with rates of poverty almost three times higher for Pakistani and Bangladeshi children than for their white British peers (Platt, 2009). Lone parenthood also intersects with child poverty: Maplethorpe and colleagues’ (2010) survey of almost 6,000 families reported that lone parents were seven times more likely to have a total family income in the lowest quintile. At the same time, support systems designed to ameliorate disadvantage—such as parenting support services—are often less accessible to families from minority ethnic groups (e.g. Butt, 2009). In the context of the present discussion, such structural inequalities have ethical implications because there is a risk of misattribution of causal factors—such that ethnicity is seen as the disadvantaging factor for children and families, rather than underlying variables such as poverty or inaccessibility of services.

There may also be a lack of cultural understanding in interpreting differences between groups. Phoenix and Husain (2007)

highlight the risk of culturally biased analysis when researchers from one cultural group study members of another group. They cite research by Gonzales and colleagues (1996; in Phoenix and Husain 2007) on Baumrind's (e.g. 1991) concept of parenting "style" (a concept rooted in research with white middle class American families). This work showed that researchers from different ethnic groups interpreted parenting practices differently: "out-group" observers made more critical judgements than "in-group" observers. This example indicates that—just as with international cross-cultural research—research across cultures within countries requires culturally sensitive analysis that takes account of intersections with structural variables such as poverty and local context.

This body of work indicates the value of the linked concepts of normalised absence and pathologised presence as a conceptual frame for reflection on the ethics of research with children and families within ethnically or culturally diverse societies. Those considerations span the research process, from the formulation of research questions to the dissemination of research findings.

#### **ETHICS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS: FROM DEFINING RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO ANALYSIS AND REPORTING**

The ethics of defining research questions and of analysis and reporting can be considered together here, because the way that a research question is defined is closely linked to the potential use of research—and so to the risk of harm (for example, through stigmatisation, or neglect of minority ethnic perspectives).

Classificatory systems of ethnicity and related topics are inevitably defined within local and national contexts (Morning, 2008), and thus are “ethically and politically dangerous” (Gunaratnam, 2007, p. 152). Aspinall (2009, p. 1418) discusses growing UK interest in migration from EU new accession countries, suggesting that

[t]he traditional agenda of identifying groups to redress discrimination and injustices remains. Yet unprecedentedly high levels of migration to the country since the mid-1990s by asylum-seekers and economic migrants from EU new accession countries—and the consequent pressures on housing and other services—have led to a focus by government on the question of what is a sustainable level of in-migration and on the broader issues of social cohesion and integration.

Aspinall’s interpretation of the causal link between migration and government concern is itself not politically neutral. It provides an example, here, of the potential for research which addresses (or which fails adequately to address) ethnic groupings to influence media or political debates—the potential to position migration or minority ethnicity as problematic, and add fuel to debates about integration or assimilation. In defining research questions and in analysing and reporting results, there is need to reflect on the following:

- What is the rationale for the research? In whose interest are the questions being asked? What is the funder’s agenda in commissioning the project? How could the findings be used by other people?

- Are the research questions neutral or could they give rise to stigmatisation of any groups?
- Do the research questions make any assumptions about any particular groups? Do they account for the intersections between ethnicity and other aspects of identity (such as age or gender) and for cultural and religious contexts?
- Do analysis and reporting take account of participants' own perspectives on their experiences, or do they privilege the researcher's analytic concerns?
- Does reporting address positives as well as negatives? The nature of social science research means that we are often concerned with researching difficulties or potentially vulnerable groups, and—unless we reflect—this can mean that analysis and reporting can position participants as problematic.

## RESEARCH TEAMS

The composition of the research team is not usually seen as an ethical concern, beyond a need to ensure team members' competence. But in research which crosses ethnic, linguistic or cultural boundaries, there are particular questions that need to be addressed.

Risks of cultural bias can be addressed, at least in part, through the construction of the research team, by recruiting researchers who are members of the ethnic, cultural or religious groups being studied. This may not always be easy to achieve, depending on the availability of candidates from those groups who meet other criteria for recruitment (e.g. in terms of

academic qualifications and research experience). At the same time, recruitment could be exploitative of the staff concerned, if the employment of minority ethnic researchers is used to give credence to a problematising analytic position. A further complicating factor stems from the intersection of ethnicity with education and social class: from a participant's perspective, the professional status of the researcher (or interpreter) may be intimidating or stigmatising, regardless of his or her ethnicity. Borchgrevnik (2003) gave an example of this in international ethnographic research, noting that low-caste participants could be reluctant to speak to high-caste interpreters. Considerations such as caste and status are no less relevant when conducting social research in any diverse society.

The extent of ethnic diversity in urban centres such as London means that it may not be feasible for a research team's composition to reflect the study population. To take an example from my own experience, in 2005 my colleagues and I conducted a study in one London local authority, which involved interviews with 60 randomly sampled parents who used local early childhood services (Wigfall, Boddy and McQuail, 2007). Including English, 16 different languages were spoken in the homes of parents interviewed. Within the timescale and available budget for this small study, it would have been impossible to recruit a research team that included this diversity.

So what can be done? There are two considerations here. First, it is necessary to reflect on the risk of cultural bias. In some cases, it will be appropriate for a research team to be recruited with regard to the ethnicity of the study population—especially

when the study is concerned with understanding the experience of particular ethnic groups, or is likely to include a significant proportion of participants from certain groups. But any study can also be informed through consultation with members of the groups being researched—for example, through iterative piloting, or with the support of expert stakeholders, or an advisory group. In the study described above, we consulted with local service managers and workers from local minority ethnic populations to ensure we began our research with an appropriate understanding. We also took advice about the employment of interpreters, and local workers who spoke community languages explained the research and sought initial consent for us to make contact with families. This emphasis on inclusive strategies helped the research as a whole, by ensuring diversity of the study sample and perspectives.

By anticipating the likely characteristics of the sample (in terms of language and ethnicity) when designing a project, it should be possible to work out how best to approach the construction of the team. Key questions to consider include the following:

- Can you recruit researchers who are members of the minority ethnic groups you are studying? If not, how will you address cultural and linguistic understanding?
- How will you ensure the competence of any associated staff you use—such as interpreters? How will you address intersecting issues such as status, to ensure that staff are not intimidating or condescending of those they perceive to be of lower status?

- How will you ensure that all those involved in the research have adequate training, and understand the purpose and nature of your research, as well as requirements for confidentiality?

## **RESEARCH LANGUAGES**

Language can be a critical barrier to participation for participants who are immigrants to the study country, and can undermine freely given informed consent. In research with children, this raises a particular issue about the relative position of children and their parents in giving permission. Children who attend school are likely to speak the majority language of their country (English in the UK), even if this is not their home language, but their parents may not. What does this mean for the common protocol, in research with children, of seeking a responsible adult's permission before approaching a child for consent? Might the adult role in the consent process be eroded when the parent/carer does not speak English? Might children from some minority ethnic groups be excluded from research because consent procedures are not accessible to non-English speaking parents? Is it appropriate for children to broker adult permission for research? Orellana and colleagues' (e.g. 2003) research on language brokering by children highlights the complexity of the power relationships involved. They noted (p508) that "[y]outh 'brokers' or 'advocates' are not neutral, nor are they invested with great societal power: they are children speaking for adults and immigrants interfacing with 'mainstream' institutions and authority figures".



Whilst Orellana and colleagues note that children's language brokering should not inevitably be seen as problematic, power differentials are also a critical characteristic of research with children (Morrow, 2008), and so their observations are very relevant here.

The need for language brokering by children can be avoided by producing information in languages spoken by potential participants (and their families). That approach incurs some financial costs for translation (and, ideally, back-translation), but more importantly, it is important to consider (a) the feasibility of this and (b) the form of information provision.

To take the example cited earlier, of our research in inner-London, the costs of producing information in 16 languages for a study of 60 families were prohibitive. Instead, an English information leaflet was prepared with a standard phrase ("If you would like this information in Language X, please call...") translated into the four most common community languages. This is a common strategy because it is less costly than full translation, but it is potentially problematic and needs some thought. For example:

- Who will answer the phone? What will happen if the call comes through to an English speaking researcher who does not know enough of the community language to access appropriate interpreting?
- What will happen if the call is directed to someone with appropriate language skills outside the research team? You will need to ensure they understand and

follow your protocols in terms of (for example) freely given and fully informed consent and confidentiality.

- Regardless of who deals with the telephone call, there is still a problem in that participants who speak other languages do not have accessible information that they can keep after contact with the researcher has ended.

Even if there is funding for translation, written information may not be appropriate for potential participants. It is necessary to consider language *and* literacy, and also dialect or local languages. For example, many Bangladeshi communities in London speak Sylheti, not Bengali. Sylheti does not have a written script, and Sylheti speakers may not read Bengali. In research with a Sylheti community, it may be of little use to translate an information sheet into Bengali. It might be more useful to provide a CD or DVD, which gives the study information verbally, and which participants can keep.

This discussion has focused on information provision, but the need to consider research languages goes further. Studies often rely on written literacy in the majority language for data collection—for example, in completion of questionnaires. Such methods can function to exclude participants who cannot read, or write, the majority language. In designing research, it is important to consider whether that approach (and the subsequent exclusion of some minority perspectives) is necessary and justifiable, or whether the design is based on cost or convenience. Even when studies do rely on written measures, it may still be possible to supplement the research design so that participants

without written literacy in the majority language can complete measures verbally—either by translation into common minority languages, or by verbal completion of measures with the support of an interpreter if necessary.

## **SAMPLING**

Providing accessible information is a key first step in avoiding the invisibility of multi-cultural perspectives in within country research. Following on through the research process, there are questions about how the sample itself is defined. Here, we turn to a pressing debate in the ethics of research design—that of “opt-in” or “opt-out” consent.

Opt-out samples are those where participants are contacted without volunteering to take part in the research—and excluded only when they say they are unwilling to participate. This approach is seen as problematic by many ethics committees because it undermines the principle that consent should be *freely given*. For example, the fourth principle in the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2010, p3) states that “[r]esearch participants must take part voluntarily, free from any coercion”.

With opt-out methods, participants may be included unless they actively say “no”. But people may find it difficult to say “no” to a researcher for a variety of reasons, and this may be a particular concern for participants from some minority ethnic groups. Morrow (2009, p5) observed that “[i]n many parts of the world, however, people do not necessarily have any experience or understanding of what research is”. She further notes that the assumption of the primacy of the individual in informed

consent is problematic in research with children, because they “are also seldom seen as completely separate persons, being always connected to parents or carers” (p5). Culturally located understandings of research, and of individual adult or child rights and freedoms, are equally relevant to research *within* a country such as the UK, because of the population’s diversity. Potential participants may have little understanding of research, or the concept of freely given individual consent, if they come from countries or communities which do not have a strong research culture, or which place little emphasis on individual rights (whether for political reasons or because of a relatively greater emphasis on kin and community than on the individual).

These observations indicate that opt-out sampling methods may be particularly problematic in terms of securing freely given consent from participants from some cultural groups. However, the key strength of opt-out sampling is that it is more inclusive than opt-in methods, which require participants actively to volunteer to take part. There is a range of evidence showing that opt-in samples are less representative than samples recruited by opt-out methods, and it is not surprising that sampling strategies which require active volunteering could inadvertently exclude people with less understanding of the potential value of research. Opt-in methods result in lower response rates, and have also been shown to bias samples towards populations with lower levels of material disadvantage. Hewison and Haines (2006), in a discussion of sample recruitment for medical research, argue that opt-in methods could act as a barrier to participation for some minority ethnic groups, giving rise to a failure to detect

differences in quality of care and outcome for these groups. This concern is pertinent to Phoenix's (e.g. 1987) arguments about the normalised absence of minority ethnic perspectives.

There is a critical distinction here between the use of opt-out methods for approaching participants, and the subsequent process of seeking freely given and fully informed consent. Hewison and Haines (2006, p. 300) write that:

[Potential participants] may not consider, for example, a brief telephone call after a letter explaining the proposed research to be an unjustifiable invasion of their privacy if there seems to be a good reason for the call and their privacy is in all other respects protected. If, as seems likely, many people who do not respond to a request would not object to being approached by a researcher, an opt-in system may deprive them of the opportunity to participate in research [...] Indeed, some people might prefer an opt-out system because of the support and reassurance that personal contact can provide.

There are parallels between this argument and Morrow's (2009) observation that consent is a process, not an event. In relation to the Young Lives study, involving 12,000 children in four economically developing countries, Morrow writes that participants' understandings and agreement to participate are checked repeatedly during the research process, and methods of recording consent are flexible according to individual participants' preferences and local contexts. This understanding of consent as a negotiated process has equal value in affluent or economically developed countries, not least in attending to issues of language,

literacy, and understandings of research. However, both opt-in and opt-out sampling methods raise potential ethics problems for the recruitment of ethnic minority participants: there is no single “best” approach. Rather, it is critical for the researcher to be aware of these issues, and how they apply to their work.

## **CONCLUSION**

The discussion presented here indicates the need to address ethics throughout the research process, to anticipate what difficulties might arise, and how they can be addressed. Practical questions about the conduct of the research—from staff recruitment to preparation of information sheets—may appear prosaic, but they are necessary to develop concrete strategies by which to achieve an inclusive cross-cultural approach.

Preparation is key. At the stage of research planning, for example, there is a need to ensure sufficient funds for translation and interpreting so that non-majority language speakers are not excluded. In doing so, it is necessary to anticipate the potential needs of parents (or other adult gatekeepers) as well as children. Consideration of culture and ethnicity should also form part of training and discussions with project workers (including external staff such as interpreters), and researchers should consider how they might embed culturally specific expertise within the research team and/or in advisory roles. The extent to which all of this is feasible (and financially practicable in a straitened funding climate) depends on the scope and focus of the research. It is perhaps easier to justify such investment of time and financial resources when research is purposely focused

on studying culture, religion or ethnicity, even if diversity is not the main focus of the work. When conducting research in diverse societies, however, there is always an ethical imperative to engage with diversity—to ensure rights to participation *and protection*.

The discussion presented here has, intentionally, raised more questions than it has offered answers. That reflects a recognition that research ethics must be situated in context, as a reflective and dialogic process—a principle that applies to any research study, but is especially pertinent to work with diverse groups. There are few simple rules that should always be followed, and few obvious right or wrong answers. In the words of a UK academic, interviewed by Boddy and Oliver (2010, p. 40): “We can stand in lectures and discuss [ethics], but it is a bit muddy—you can’t have absolutes. You couldn’t policy legislate for every scenario.”

The considerations discussed in this paper indicate a need to “get muddy”—to make ethical tensions and ethnocentric assumptions explicit throughout every stage and aspect of the research process. Above all, this is worthwhile because reflexive ethical practice will benefit the quality of research as a whole, by addressing the normalised absence and pathologised presence of minority childhood experiences within diverse societies.

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## *Between participation and protection: Involving children in child protection research*

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The main concern of this chapter is what I perceive as a need for reflection on how to balance two of the three central tenets in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: the right to participation and the right to protection. Research involving vulnerable groups of children and young people underlines this need, and will be the basis for the discussion.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first part of the chapter concerns citizenship and the ways children and young people are positioned when social scientists aim to generate knowledge about them. This leads to a discussion of the ethics of participation in research. As examples I then use two approaches to the involvement of children and young people. The first is a user survey and the second is ongoing action-based

involvement, both targeting individuals in Norwegian state care. The examples were chosen because they, each in their own way, highlight ethical issues relevant to cross-cultural child research as well. This makes for a transition to a discussion of the ethics of protection for participants in research. Finally, I sum up this discussion with reference to ethical challenges in cross-cultural child research.

### **CHILDREN AS CITIZENS**

In my view, the question of involving children in research is inextricably linked with modern thinking about children as citizens: “Bringing children’s citizenship centrally into adult thinking and practice, then, will foster a climate of mutual respect and support across the generations that will bring benefit to all” (Neale, 2004:180). For children, as well as for adults, citizenship involves belonging to and interacting with others in a group, community or society. Children’s political identity and sense of democratic participation is supported by their being counted as members of their community and their being involved in collective and individual decision-making (Lister, 2007). In other words, citizenship for children is important in the short run because of its relational aspects, and in the long run because children learn democracy and how to be members of civil society.

The concept of ‘citizenship’ is closely linked to participation, and Jans (2004:40) argues that the only way for children to achieve citizenship is through participation in a wide sense, and involvement: “The citizenship of children is based on a continuous learning process in which children and adults are

interdependent". At the same time, he reminds us that local forms of participation are the first to be within reach for children. This point of view is echoed by Ben-Arieh and Boyer (2005:33), who equate child participation with child citizenship, adding that participation is the only way for children to learn citizenship. From a citizenship perspective, participation in research can thus be conceptualised as an extension of children's membership rights, and as such is important both in the short and the long run.

As Lister (2007) points out, participation includes obligations or responsibilities as well as rights, however. For children, this means activities that adults expect them to carry out as well as activities that they themselves consider important (Smith & Bjerke, 2009:16). One issue will thus be to what extent participation in research is primarily an activity adults expect children to carry out, and to what extent and under what conditions participation is considered important by children as well. This may well be related to how children are positioned in the process of knowledge generation.

## **POSITIONING CHILDREN IN THE PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE**

The last two to three decades have increasingly demonstrated different ways of involving children in research, albeit with more or less participatory approaches. Three different positions can be distinguished with regard to how children are positioned in the production of knowledge, illustrating a trend from involvement with no or minimal influence to involvement with prime influence.

The first position reflects the traditional research model which presupposes a stable and asymmetrical power relationship between researchers and researched. This asymmetry is particularly apparent when the participants are children (Christensen & Prout, 2002). The researcher is attributed expert status, and the right to define, interpret and explain phenomena and causal relationships. This way of positioning children in the production of knowledge can be designated research on children, and is frequently focused on issues connected with problems and deviance. Information is largely, but not exclusively, gathered from adults, while children are often not seen as reliable sources of information about themselves (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Second, an increased focus on participatory issues in research has enabled a possible destabilisation of this traditional relationship in child research as well. Studies are now supposed to be with children, not only on children (Greig & Taylor, 1999:145). Researchers may thus involve children in some or all parts of the research, for instance in formulating questions, piloting, choice of methods, and interpretation and dissemination of results. The work is still directed by grown-up researchers, however.

A third position is research by children (Kellett, 2010:7), signifying that children themselves initiate, conduct, analyse and disseminate research after being taught the necessary skills. According to Kellett (op. cit.:7) this re-positioning should affect all research involving children. There is a great difference between using child-produced knowledge as quaint examples or tokens within an adult-led context and involving children directly in analyses and interpretations of materials they have produced

themselves (Hart, 1992:8; Shier, 2001:109). Research both with and by children can be defined as participatory, building on the principle that “the people whose lives are being studied should be involved in defining the research questions and also take an active part in both collecting and analyzing the data” (Ennew & Plateau, 2004:30).

Research on, with and by children is easily interpreted as a hierarchy where the latter is “best”. I do not necessarily agree with this, as choice of methods must depend on the kind of knowledge one wishes to generate. And a commitment to involving children in research through the use of participatory approaches cannot exclusively endorse the types of knowledge that lend themselves to these approaches. For instance, much essential knowledge about children is generated through analyses of administrative data sets, where children themselves have not been involved at all. All the same, the distinctions are useful since they highlight different ways of involving children. However, this way of distinguishing between different positions does not address the question of participants’ vulnerability. Nor is it very common to ask children about their views on participating in research, from whatever position.

### **WHAT ABOUT AGE?**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines “the child” as someone between 0 and 18 years of age, a view shared by the majority of the researcher respondents in Powell et al’s international project about ethical issues in child research (2011:2). Consequently, much of the literature discusses

“the child” as some kind of generic term without questioning whether age matters. However, researchers aiming to include children in research experience again and again how age does matter, for instance in the sense that younger and older children need different methodological approaches, respond differently to participating in research and so on. As Beazley et al. (2009:368) note:

Childhood is not homogeneous, not least because of the evolving capacities and physical growth of human children. It is perhaps the most heterogeneous stage in the life cycle. Within childhood, age differences possibly outweigh gender, ethnicity, religion and other discriminatory factors.

I will return to this point below.

## **THE ETHICS OF PARTICIPATION**

At present there are many valid arguments, professional as well as philosophical and ethical, for generally involving children and young people and for involving them in research more specifically. Children are generally seen as competent and as able to voice—or otherwise demonstrate—what they think and feel from an early age. Thus, earlier arguments against involving children based on their lack of competence are no longer seen as valid, as long as age-appropriate and “child-friendly” methods are used. It is further accepted that children have knowledge about their situation that grown-ups cannot have, and their experiences, reflections and cultures have increasingly become legitimate research issues (Kjørholt, 2004). And, as mentioned above, participation in research



is judged to be important in preparing for citizenship, thus being significant in a long-term as well as in a short-term perspective.

The perception of children as actors that has been paramount during the last couple of decades (e.g. Christensen & Prout, 2002) includes a focus on involving children in research in order to elicit their views, and, in more action-based research, to help them advocate for change. Studies of children who have participated in decisions concerning them, for instance in child welfare or child custody cases, fairly uniformly conclude that children want to have their say, although they do not expect their views to be decisive as regards the outcome. Children also seem to understand participation in a relational context, in that their point of view is stated and interpreted by them in relation to what others, for instance their peers, parents or teachers, think and how these others react to their statements (e.g. Barnes, 2007:150; Fitzgerald, Graham & Taylor, 2010:300).

Powell et al. (2011:2-3) found that children were at least occasionally included in child-relevant research by both Majority and Minority world researchers, but that more Minority than Majority world researchers were aware of projects where children had been researchers or co-researchers. However, three major influences on the way research involving children is conducted were found cross-nationally, namely the researchers' own ethical principles, their previous experience, and their institutional ethics requirements. Although there has been a shift towards a perception of children as competent actors as a consequence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, institutional constraints will vary

between countries and influence the actual participation of children in research.

#### **AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: A USER SURVEY AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORWEGIAN STATE CARE**

In present-day Norway user surveys are seen as an intrinsic part of evaluating public services, whenever possible. It has not been common to conduct such surveys among child welfare clients, neither among parents nor children and young people. Gautun et al. (2006) conducted a survey among 13-18-year-olds in long-term residential care, and recommended that such surveys become part of the ongoing quality control of child welfare services. However, nothing further was done until 2010, when the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs commissioned an electronically based user survey among 9-18-year-olds in foster care, residential care, or at home receiving an intensive therapeutic intervention called Multi Systemic Therapy (MST).<sup>1</sup> MST targets youth with severe behavioural problems, substance abuse and delinquency (Rambøll, 2011).

The main aim of the survey was to generate knowledge about

- How children and young people in different types of state care think they are encountered and communicated with
- To what extent they think they can influence their own situation and the services they receive

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1 See [www.atferdssenteret.no](http://www.atferdssenteret.no) for a more thorough description.

- Children and young people's reflections on the quality of care

The questions were largely governed by goals formulated by the state for the state child welfare services, such as quality, user involvement, ensuring the clients' rights and so on. All of these goals are important, but not necessarily the primary concerns of children and young people themselves.

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 2,729 individuals, and the overall response rate was 38 per cent with 815 questionnaires returned. MST clients had an extremely low response rate, not more than 12 per cent, while the response rate from those in foster care or residential care was slightly above 40 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

### *A very vulnerable group*

There is no doubt that the participants in this survey are members of a potentially very vulnerable group. Children and young people in foster or residential care and those receiving MST will have experienced, and often still experience, demanding life situations, with hardships and negative life events. They will have more or less severe problems of their own, and very often have socially marginalised parents with

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<sup>2</sup> As we know, response rates of around 50 per cent are the rule rather than the exception when users or clients are invited to participate in surveys or interviews (for instance Sandbæk, 2002). Still, the response rate in the user survey was so low, particularly among the MST youth, that the results cannot be generalised.

ill health, mental health problems, substance dependence or other life problems.

On the one hand, it is particularly important that these user or client groups become involved so that their points of view, reactions and criticisms become available. Thus it is important to investigate their views through user surveys or other means. But on the other hand, it is debatable whether a traditional user survey is the best approach. The study discussed here had several drawbacks which also made me question the ethics of the whole venture. These drawbacks would have been present even if the target groups had all been from Norway. But during 2010 around 30 per cent of those in residential care were from other countries, with children and young people from various Asian countries as the largest sub-group (Backe-Hansen et al., 2011:228). The significance of cultural differences was not discussed, although these may well have exacerbated the problems I discuss below.

#### *A disregard of age and mastery of the Norwegian language*

All participants were invited to respond to an electronic survey. However IT-savvy the children and young people of today may be, it is debatable whether one can expect 9-12 year olds to fully master the format of an electronic survey. There were no alternative ways of participating if some found this difficult. As mentioned above, the participants were between 9 and 18 years of age, but the same questions were used regardless. The format of the survey was a series of statements, and participants were asked to tick off whether they wholly or partly agreed or disagreed with them. Smiley faces were used as decision aids.

For instance, the participants were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with the following statement: "All in all, I feel OK where I'm living now". It is debatable whether the youngest ones were able to comprehend this question, particularly as many of the children and young people in state care also have learning difficulties. What should be their point of reference? Another statement was: "The grown-ups here tell me what is going to happen".<sup>3</sup> What is going to happen to whom? When? How? Which grown-ups and what if some and not all tell them? Nor is it probable that children from different cultures all have the same expectations from adults, or expect similar treatment from those in authority.

Although most of the statements concerned concrete situations, they were formulated as fairly abstract statements, as the above examples show. We know that children's ability to reason about abstract matters increases with age, while young children need to participate in conversations, do exercises etc. to elicit reflections. Thus we may suppose that the meaning ascribed by the participants to the questions and their replies to them varied with age, while there is no way to ascertain the content of this probable variation by reading the responses. A sizeable proportion of children and young people in foster or residential care have learning problems, and this probably increased the difficulty of responding to the questions for an unknown part of the sample. Children and young people from other countries may, of course, have language problems in addition, which will

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3 "De voksne her forteller meg..."

again have influenced their understanding of the questions significantly.

### *A disregard of context*

As mentioned above, the participants in this survey either lived in foster care (in family-like settings), in residential care or at home with their parents (recipients of MST). They were asked the same questions regardless, although those in residential care were presented with some additional statements.

One statement the children and young people were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with was: “I can talk with the grown-ups here/my foster parents/my parents about difficult things”. The meaning of this statement will not be the same across settings. In a residential home, children and youth will typically like some of the grown-ups, dislike some, and feel indifferent to some. Which group should be the point of reference when the question positions all the grown-ups as equal? Thus, this statement gives preference to living in a family-like situation. In other countries residential units may be much larger than the typical Norwegian unit, housing 6-8 children or young people, with few opportunities to develop a trusting relationship to adults. Then it might be more relevant to ask about peer relationships, which was not done in the Norwegian survey. Additionally, youth receiving MST will typically have high conflict levels with their parents, which is part of the problem to be addressed, and which may also lead the youth to give overly negative replies.

Another statement was: “Here, I participate in decisions about my everyday life”. Again, everyday life in a home-like

setting is very different from everyday life in a residential setting. And what kinds of decisions is the question referring to? What to wear, what to eat, when to go to sleep, whether to use a mobile phone or not, whether to do homework or not, whether to visit friends or not, leisure activities, visits from one's parents or siblings—? And since a child or young person will typically be invited to participate in some decisions and not others, what should he or she agree with then? This question also presupposes that children and young people actually participate in at least some decisions concerning them. This may not be the case in all cultural settings. Nor will expectations of the amount or content of the participation to which children and young people think themselves entitled be the same across cultures.

### *Using the results*

Being the first large-scale user survey involving children and young people since the 2006 study, this study has a large symbolic value, fitting into the official ideals of openness and participation among child welfare users/clients. As such it has also received a reasonable level of media attention, and has been given prominence on the web pages of the Directorate of Children, Youth and Family Affairs. In addition, the results from the study fit in well with the ongoing process of reducing the use of expensive residential care and increasing the use of far less expensive foster care and home-based services, since children and young people in foster care overall gave more positive replies than those in residential care.

In this process, obvious methodological weaknesses of the study, like the low participation rate, lack of knowledge about

the non-participants, possible effects of the way the questions were posed and of comparing results from children and young people in very different situations, easily disappear. This is compounded by the fact that the report does not in any way discuss what answers could be expected, or how to interpret the different answers given. The percentages live on and are used in the ongoing discourse about the disadvantages of residential care while the methodological weaknesses, which must be expected to impact on the interpretation of results, are ignored.

### ***How were the children and young people positioned?***

The methods section of the report mentions that the survey was developed by Rambøll in collaboration with the child welfare authorities and researchers, and then tested out on and discussed with a sample of children and young people in foster care or residential care (Rambøll, 2011:9). It is not mentioned whether it was attempted to ensure that some of them came from countries other than Norway. They are thanked by Rambøll along with the others who contributed. However, the report does not mention in what ways the children and young people influenced the themes that were addressed, or how the questions were finally formulated. Nor does it mention whether input from children and young people for instance led to some questions being dropped, however important the Directorate as the initiator of the survey found them. In the news item which was posted on the home pages of the Directorate when the survey was launched, it was stated only that the children and young people gave valuable input which had been taken



into consideration in the process.<sup>4</sup> In the process of preparing the survey, the children and young people involved may thus have been positioned as experts on their own lives or primarily as tokens (Hart, 1992) in a grown-up venture.

It must be said that this way of involving children and young people in the development of surveys is quite common. It is also common to limit the mention of their involvement in the way that was done in Rambøll's (2011) report. However, to take the involvement of children and young people seriously, it would have been necessary to say more about who they were and how exactly they contributed.

As participants in the user survey, the children and young people who were allowed to or chose to participate were positioned as informants sharing their views through a structured survey. This is a much-used and efficient approach which often results in useful information, but which at the same time limits the scope of information that it is possible to generate. It also makes the interpretations of the data primarily the responsibility of the researchers. In my view, this approach is both acceptable and important, but presupposes sufficient consideration of cultural and national contexts. Challenges connected with these necessary considerations, as exemplified above, become even greater when children from different cultures and countries participate in the same survey, or when similar questions are asked in cross-country research.

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4 See <http://www.bufetat.no/nyheter/Historisk-undersokelse-med-barnevernsbarn>, the news item which was posted when the survey was launched (Accessed October 30 2012).

## **AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: ACTION-BASED WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER AND RESIDENTIAL CARE**

As a contrast I wish to discuss ongoing, action-based work with young people in foster and residential care. This work has been in progress for several years, initiated and conducted by an NGO called “Forandringsfabrikken”.<sup>5</sup> This NGO typically works with young people in contact with the assistance services such as the mental health services and child welfare services. Work is done with small groups of young people over time to generate knowledge about their thoughts and feelings about the services they receive. They are then helped to disseminate this knowledge to practitioners, bureaucrats and policymakers through presentations and in small, easily accessible reports. The work is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In the early autumn of 2011 the Minister of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion<sup>6</sup> was presented with a report from a group of young child welfare clients, “BarnevernsProffene”,<sup>7</sup> with the aid of the Change Factory (BarnevernsProffene & Forandringsfabrikken, 2008-2011). With clear reference to the annual State Budget Proposition, which is always published at the beginning of October, their report was called “White Paper No. 1 from children and young people”.<sup>8</sup>

In this document the youth participants, who were aged 13

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5 “The Change Factory”, see [www.forandringsfabrikken.no](http://www.forandringsfabrikken.no) (Accessed October 30 2012)

6 Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsminister Audun Lysbakken

7 The “Child Welfare Professionals”

8 ”Stortingsmelding nr. 1 fra barn og unge”

and older, delineate the kind of child welfare services they want. And what they want is services where caseworkers, foster parents and residential care workers alike see them and respect them, and listen to their views and wishes. They are not very impressed by the quality of the training child welfare workers receive, and find personal traits far more important than theoretical knowledge. They think that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of behavioural modification within residential care. Thus the young people want residential units to be staffed by caring adults who don't transgress their authority in order to discipline them, and adults who work long shifts so that the young people don't have to relate to a series of adults every day.

The report builds on work done over three years, involving in total around one hundred child welfare clients both in foster and residential care. A smaller group has also been involved in disseminating the conclusions and advice contained in the report to child welfare authorities all over the country.

### ***How were the young people positioned?***

In the work of the Change Factory, the young people are positioned as experts throughout the process, from defining what the important issues are to disseminating the results. This is reflected in the name of the group: The Child Welfare Professionals (BanevernsProffene). Adults from the NGO work closely with the young people at all times, and also support them if their involvement leads to stressful reactions. Thus the young people are positioned as subjects, and it may also be said that the research is done by them with the young people themselves as the tool.

As in all other kinds of research involving people directly, the participants in the Change Factory come from a selected group. Some are too young to participate, and those who are not comfortable with a role as activist or “politician” will exclude themselves. Thus the risk involved with regard to the knowledge generated by these young people is, as in all other politicised research and development work, that the messages from the most vocal and active will be constituted as “the truth” about life in care.

#### **THE ETHICS OF PROTECTION**

The examples discussed above serve as a useful transition to the ethics of protection, as they show both advantages and disadvantages connected with focusing too one-sidedly on the participation aspect. The points I will elaborate on here reflect our Norwegian guidelines, but as Powell et al. (2011) show, many of these are shared across cultures, although they may manifest themselves differently in Majority and Minority countries. For instance, the need for consent from parents or caregivers does not vary much across different contexts (op. cit.: 3). On the other hand, over-protective ethical review processes are a greater concern among Minority world researchers along with keeping children’s views confidential and ensuring that they are not coerced, while Majority world researchers are more concerned with cultural contexts, children’s safety, and the possibility that sensitive research topics may upset the children (op. cit.:4). However, it also seems that the key ethical issues discussed in the literature are the same across cultures, namely informed

consent, protection of children, anonymity and confidentiality, and payment of research participants (Powell, 2011:1).

### ***Informed voluntary consent***

A fundamental ethical guideline concerns informed voluntary consent. This has to be ensured in advance, and renegotiated throughout the research process as participants are at any time free to discontinue their participation without further justification. In this context children are seen as a vulnerable group more or less by definition since they do not reach their majority until the age of 18. If they are younger than 15, their parents or those in loco parentis must consent on their behalf before they are themselves asked to assent. Between 16 and 18 the young people's own consent is usually deemed sufficient by the Privacy Ombudsman for Research. This means that several gatekeepers or door-openers are involved when researchers want to do research with children or to engage them directly in more action-based procedures. It also means that those needing parental consent cannot participate in research if their parents refuse, even if this is what they want.

Parents may also have many reasons for refusing. For instance they may think that the research questions are potentially harmful to their children, or too difficult for them to answer. Some do not see the usefulness of social research. Some do not like school-based research since it takes valuable time away from school work, which in Norway has become a bigger issue during the last decade or so because of the sheer amount of research taking place in schools. Parents in marginalised situations rarely

participate in research themselves for that matter, and may be even more anxious about letting their children be involved. Some also let their children decide, but of course the signals the parents send out will influence their children anyway. Thus, researchers wanting to include children in research first and foremost need to convince the gatekeepers.

From a citizenship perspective it may be argued that parents are overly protective of their children when it comes to letting them participate in social research, and deprive them of opportunities to have their say and perhaps make a difference. But the responsibility for convincing the various gatekeepers still rests with the researcher.

### ***Balancing risks and benefits***

Balancing risks and benefits is one of the fundamental principles in research ethics. Several arguments might also be used to argue that participation in social research is beneficial. As discussed above, that children and young people participate in research may have an intrinsic value from a citizenship perspective because it creates a possibility for them to have their say about something which matters to them. Also, children and young people may give altruistic reasons for participating in research, arguing that they want to help others in the same situation as themselves. Third, in line with the thinking behind user surveys now proliferating within public services, participating in research may contribute to increasing the quality of the services offered.

At the same time, it is an open question whether participation in research will actually lead to better quality services for the

participants. With regard to the user survey discussed above, for instance, the large majority will have left residential care long before any changes resulting from the survey are implemented. The same applies to many of the young people participating through the Change Factory. Here, however, the participants experience the satisfaction of being listened to and directly praised for their engagement even if they are no longer in care. They may also see changes in the child welfare system which will, amongst other factors, be attributed to their efforts. This is not a common occurrence for participants in research, however.

When engaging in research with potentially vulnerable groups there is an extra obligation to argue convincingly that the benefits are larger than the risks. This is, first, the responsibility of the researchers and their ethical review boards. Second, it is the responsibility of the gatekeepers or door-openers helping the researchers gain access to possible participants. Third, it is the responsibility of the participants or those consenting on their behalf, given sufficiently comprehensive information about the proposed research.

Norwegian social research is quite comprehensively—some will say too comprehensively—regulated by ethical guidelines when it comes to recruiting children and young people as research participants. Thus the initial phase of the research process is well taken care of. The actual research process is more up to those doing the research, save for the premise that participants can opt out at any stage without giving a reason. This has to be made clear to them at the outset. In addition it is quite common to organise some back-up, such as giving contact information to

identified professionals the participants can talk to if participation creates discomfort in any way.

However, certain additional aspects are not as easily regulated. This has to do with the relational aspect of research participation. In the user survey (Rambøll, 2011), children and young people in residential care participated as a group although they completed the questionnaire individually. We do not know how this influenced the responses that were given, or whether there was social pressure among the children and young people either to participate or to refrain. With regard to the work done by the Change Factory, we do not know to what extent children and young people who disagree with the conclusions which have been disseminated stay on in the group, or how uncomfortable it would be to withdraw from the process.

### ***Disseminating research results***

Ensuring confidentiality is another fundamental research ethical tenet, which has to be observed in various ways during the research process and not least when results are disseminated. This is usually fairly easy to deal with in survey studies. In action-based research, however, when children and young people themselves front the results, their identity will be public. For some, this will be part of a role they want, feel comfortable with, or choose to take on with sufficient support from peers and caring adults. Others may prefer to remain anonymous. One issue here may be discomfort associated with becoming known as a child welfare client, for instance, or with fear of losing privileges or finding it more difficult to receive services after having publicly criticised



those you depend on to receive the services. Then, it is essential to work within a social and relational context where all kinds of reactions from the participants are socially acceptable. Also it is essential that the process of dissemination of the results continues after the results have been publicised.

Closely related to this issue is the question of further stigmatisation of groups that are already vulnerable. On the one hand such stigmatisation is easily increased in a context where social researchers tend to occupy themselves primarily with poor service outcomes and all the disadvantages of our various helping systems. In this context being an agent instead of a passive recipient of others' understanding of the services, and thus achieving a greater degree of control over the content of this dissemination, may be preferable.

#### **THE DIALECTICS BETWEEN PARTICIPATION AND PROTECTION**

In a recent edited book about children as citizens Kjørholt (2010) argues that a holistic perspective is necessary in implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. When children are given the right to participation and influence, this must include an assessment of their right to protection as well as care. It has not been common for researchers to combine these aspects, rather the drive has been towards presenting arguments for participation as opposed to over-protecting children. Ennew and Plateau (2004) offer one alternative approach through combining four articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to elaborate on what they call "the child's right to be properly researched", thus combining the right to participation with the right to protection:

*Article 12.1 (the “democracy article”)* implies that children’s perspectives and opinions must be integral to research. This is in line with much of the existing literature on involving children in research, whether the research issues are children’s experiences and reflections, their relationships and cultures they are part of, social marginalisation and inclusion or living conditions and well-being. Involvement of children follows logically from an understanding of children as competent actors. It can be argued that both the projects used as examples in this chapter are grounded in Article 12.

*Article 13.1 (freedom of expression)* implies that methods need to be found, and used, to help children express their perspectives and opinions freely in research. In other words, an intention to involve children is not sufficient in itself; researchers must also use methods that are suitable to the purpose. In many publications on this theme, the term “child-friendly methods” is used. This again brings up the issue of age and age-appropriate methodology. Thus children have a right to express themselves freely, but researchers have an obligation to facilitate this in research. It can be argued that both examples in this chapter are grounded in this article as well with regard to giving children and young people an opportunity to express themselves. But the two projects are also very different. The user survey used a fixed format which, I have argued, was not properly suited to particularly the youngest participants nor took into consideration the effects of cultural differences between the participants. The other project used a flexible format which has shown itself well suited to eliciting young people’s points

of view and sustaining their participation through a process leading to public dissemination.

*Article 36 (protection against exploitation)* implies that children must not be harmed or exploited through taking part in research. In other words, researchers have an ethical obligation when it comes to avoiding harm, and different gatekeepers' roles can be construed as taking part in the discussion of possible harm. The more vulnerable a child participant is, the greater the responsibility of discussing benefit in relation to harm.

The two examples discussed here differ significantly on this count. In the user survey the benefit to the child was taken for granted and possible harm was not discussed. However, the study followed decisions made by the Privacy Ombudsman for Research, and it must be supposed that harm/benefit had been discussed. But possible harm ensuing from presenting the children with questions they might not understand remains an issue. Further, the user survey was conducted during a set period, involving those who were then in foster care, residential care or MST. The report was published three months later, and possible changes based on the results will not benefit participants who were in residential care or receiving MST directly.

The work done by the Change Factory is quite different in this respect. They developed a close relationship with the other young people in the group, and the adults following them also had the role of mentors and coaches. However, we don't know how many of them experience their role as activists as uncomfortable, or how the persons responsible deal with young people who might not want this role.

*Article 3.3 (competence of responsible bodies)* implies that research must conform to the highest possible scientific standards, and researchers must be carefully trained and supervised.<sup>9</sup> Neither of the two examples used in this chapter illustrates research in the traditional sense, but both involve children and young people in issues that are legitimate and relevant research concerns. Thus it is also relevant to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches from a citizenship as well as a participation perspective (Ennew & Plateau, op. cit.: 29).

#### **IN CONCLUSION: FURTHER DISCUSSION OF CROSS-CULTURAL CHALLENGES**

The discussion in this chapter underlines the perhaps dualistic nature of the child-parent entity in Norway. On the one hand parents have an obligation to protect their children, but on the other hand we like to think of children as independent beings with their own rights. This is in contrast to the description of the Young Lives project (Morrow 2009), which takes place in four countries in the Majority world. Here, participation in the project is a family matter, and possible benefits from participating are seen in relation to the family as a whole, not only in relation to the child involved. This makes for different types of justification for participation, perhaps with some kind of remuneration of the participants and/or their parents having greater importance than in more affluent societies (Morrow, op. cit.:10-11). More generally, Morrow's argument raises the question of how the

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<sup>9</sup> For further elaboration of these four provisions and their relation to research see Ennew & Plateau (2004).

right to participation in research and otherwise is understood. In her discussion of young people's rights and advocacy services, Barnes (2007:142-144) points out that a predominantly Western focus on individual rights may actually be detrimental to the interests of young people in public care, unless an ethic of care is developed alongside the rights perspective. An ethic of care resonates more with the relational understanding of participation which I also discussed earlier, and which now seems to be gaining more support (Backe-Hansen, 2011:11).

Then again, researchers in the Majority world may want to involve children and young people who hold far more responsible and adult-like positions, such as street children or child labourers, than their counterparts in Western countries. They will wish to decide on their own behalf whether they want to participate or not, and researchers will need to work directly with them or their organisations in order to gain access. In Norway and other Western countries, this would only rarely be an option with young people under 16 or even 18 years of age.

In the Majority world it is also more common to involve children and young people in action-based research, which may entail mobilising them to work with issues like the environment or child rights. Whereas social research in Norway may be uncomfortable or boring for children and young people, participation may even be dangerous for children and young people in the Majority world. This highlights the issues of active, informed consent and confidentiality in different ways.

Doing research with children and young people who really suffer material and other hardships also highlights the issue of

short-term benefits from research, including some kind of reimbursement in cash or in kind to participants. There will also be greater demands on the researchers with regard to including plans for applying the research results from the outset. In addition, there will be an extra obligation not to raise unrealistic expectations as to the effects of participating. As discussed previously, participation in the user survey could not lead to positive changes for the children and young people involved, but perhaps for those entering care at a later stage. Thus participation could be motivated by the opportunity to “have their say”, or by a wish to help others. The young people participating in the action research would, on the other hand, feel the immediate satisfaction of being listened to by people in authority. They might feel that they contributed to change, but they might equally be disappointed because change is driven by a host of other mechanisms they cannot control. The ethical obligations to avoid risk and enhance benefits are the same in general, but the way they are concretised will easily differ across cultures and countries. All participants in research are entitled to fair treatment and to have their dignity and self-worth respected. Involving children and young people in research must never just be the means to an end. However, how this is achieved, and how the different ethical principles are implemented and weighted, will vary between countries and cultures. In a Minority world context there is therefore a need to reflect more thoroughly on the consequences of including children and young people from several cultures and countries in ongoing national research. There is also a need to reflect on the effects of very differing contexts in designing cross-national research.

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## *Ethical issues in research with children living amidst political violence*

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Since the 1960s there has been increasing attention to the ethical dimensions of social research. This is evidenced in the development of numerous guidelines and codes of conduct, commonly organized by academic discipline.<sup>1</sup> Such codes are usually broad in nature, setting out general principles according to which research should be conducted. As such, they do not capture the

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1 This article builds upon Hart, J. and Tyrer, B. 2006 'Research with Children Living in Situations of Armed Conflict: Concepts, Ethics & Methods'. University of Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre available at <http://www.eldis.org/assets/Docs/23193.html> and [www.rsc.ox.ac.uk](http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk)

2 For example, anthropological codes of conduct include: American Anthropological Association (1998) Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association. Available from: <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm> Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and The Commonwealth (1999) Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice available from: <http://les.man.ac.uk/sa/ASA/Ethics/ethics.htm>

specific issues related to research in settings of extreme violence and instability. Furthermore, they do not embrace the additional concerns that inevitably arise when researching with children in such settings. Meanwhile, the discussion of ethics in research with children has reflected the overwhelmingly European/North American focus of childhood studies within the social sciences and, as such, has offered relatively little reflection upon child research in conflict-affected countries which, at present, are principally located in the so-called ‘global South’.

In this paper I seek to draw attention to some of the specific ethical issues arising in the conduct of research with children in communities affected by ongoing political violence. The aim is not to prescribe a comprehensive set of procedures applicable across diverse settings: given the particular challenges of each context, such a generalised approach could be misleading and counter-productive.<sup>3</sup> Instead I will discuss underlying issues of principle that are hopefully relevant across very different settings of political violence.

### **WHAT IS A CHILD?**

Social science understandings of children continue to evolve as a result of work across a range of academic disciplines. Inevitably how we think *about* children will affect all aspects of how we conduct research with them: from the questions we explore to

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3 Silkin and Hendrie, 1997: 174

the methods employed.<sup>4</sup> Anthropologists have drawn attention to the variety of ways in which the competencies and roles of children may be conceptualised in different cultural contexts.<sup>5</sup> Developmental psychologists in the tradition of Lev Vygotsky have explored the role that a child's environment plays in cognitive and social development.<sup>6</sup> Taking both perspectives into consideration, it is important to anticipate that children's roles and competencies will be strongly shaped not only by local culture but also by social and physical conditions in that setting.

Growing up amidst political violence can have a huge impact upon the roles and competencies of the young. For example, death, injury or dispersal of family members can lead to greatly expanded responsibilities for children—as caregivers and breadwinners—which compel the development of certain skills and awareness. Similarly, daily exposure to gross asymmetries of power will likely prompt an early understanding of political matters.<sup>7</sup> Anticipation of such impact is vital to ensure the relevance of the research agenda and questions. This is not only an issue of intellectual concern but also one of ethics. Research with children that does not relate to their everyday realities living amidst political violence or that fails to address their concerns and understanding is not only a missed opportunity for the researcher, it is also a pointless and

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4 Beazley et al. ask “What exactly (and what age) is a child when seen as the subject rather than object of research? How does this affect both methodology and method?”, 2009: 365

5 See, for example, Montgomery, 2009: 50-78; also Lancy, 2008

6 Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, B. 2003

7 See Hart, 2008

possibly risky burden to impose upon participants. Questions predicated upon assumptions such as children's inherent desire for peace (and rejection of violence), their lack of political awareness, and their freedom from the responsibilities associated with 'adulthood' can serve to exclude the perspectives of many children or to pathologise their lives and viewpoints. While an open-ended, participatory approach to research may help to avoid this trap, all methods can prove exclusionary if wrong assumptions are made. For example, conducting enquiry into children's experiences of school in a normative tone that suggests education is an undeniable good can marginalise children for whom the classroom is a place of severe risk, children whose responsibilities as heads of household prevent attendance, or those who simply see little point in schooling. Thus, the initial challenge for the researcher is to ensure that he or she is working reflexively and not making assumptions about children's lived realities or their values.

#### **ENGAGEMENT IN A SETTING OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

An environment of political violence poses particular challenges for safe, ethically responsible research involving children. The facilitator must take steps to anticipate these challenges in order to minimise any potential risks. Restrictions of movement, the breakdown of communications, the lack of security and a general atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion can produce specific risks when meeting and working with children. Moreover, in settings of societal upheaval parents and others in a child's community may seek to assert conservative values and

social norms that create an additional level of constraint, often especially for girls.

If an outsider, the researcher must be aware that her or his presence may affect the social dynamics within the community by potentially bringing in unfamiliar practices, attitudes and resources. Furthermore, the visibility of their presence can draw attention to those children who engage in research activities, thereby arousing suspicion and potentially creating risk.<sup>8</sup> Preparation is vital, both in order to assess the nature of possible risks and in order to develop a strategy to minimise these.<sup>9</sup> Some of the key questions that need to be asked are:

- What concerns are likely to exist amongst the immediate community about bringing children together for research activities?
- How might such concerns relate to the specific composition of groups of children – for example, in relation to mixing males and females, or children from different class/caste or ethnic groupings?
- Are the local political-military actors likely to take an interest in these activities? If so, what relationships may need to be built and what assurances must be given?
- What spaces, if any, exist within the immediate locale where it is possible to conduct research in a manner that ensures security and privacy without raising suspicion?

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8 See Veale, 2005

9 See Newman, 2005

As a starting-point the researcher should have a sound grasp of ethical issues as expressed in relevant codes of ethics. However, it is important to recognise that such codes can only provide a broad framework. It is the underlying principles that must be grasped, particularly the paramount need to ensure the safety and well-being of participating children. These must then be related to the particular setting in which the researcher intends to work. For example, ethics committees in universities often expect researchers to obtain written informed consent. However, in settings of political violence and instability, local people are often very reluctant to sign forms and to have their names registered in any semi-official manner: maintaining anonymity may be an important element of efforts to protect themselves and their families. To insist on a signed form can alienate potential research participants or even put them at risk.

Obtaining up-to-date and accurate information about the location, including the current political situation, is obviously vital to ensure that the principles of ethical research are applied in the most appropriate manner. Local community leaders, NGO staff members, academics, rights monitors and journalists may all be good sources of relevant information. In addition, the researcher should obtain advice from knowledgeable locals or experts about the culture of the community as to the suitability of particular methods and the most appropriate way to raise specific issues in order to minimise the risk of creating suspicion or concern. For example, I have employed drama-based methods to very productive and enjoyable effect with children in some locations where young people are regularly involved



in performance. However, in other places—where it was vital to maintain a quiet, low-key profile—the unfamiliarity of such activities would potentially attract too much attention. This example illustrates the kind of interplay of local culture and security conditions that needs to be taken into account.

With regard to the choice of research location, it may be necessary to discuss plans with relevant civil or military authorities, including non-state actors.<sup>10</sup> It is unrealistic to expect that research can be conducted without the knowledge of such authorities. In order to avoid raising suspicion it is therefore better to have consulted beforehand and demonstrated a commitment to transparency. These authorities may also raise relevant issues that are worth exploring. At the same time, however, priority must always be given to confidentiality and anonymity, and efforts are needed to ensure that there is no expectation from authorities regarding access to data that can be traced back to research participants.

The researcher must also consider the consequences of young people's participation in relation to their position within the family and community. By pursuing an approach that encourages children to express their views, reflect upon their situation and articulate their aspirations, the researcher may well be challenging the status quo. In many places the prospect of young people speaking up and voicing their views may represent a threat. The result could be a backlash against the children themselves. In order to avoid this situation, the researcher must work carefully

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10 Boyden, 2004: 228

to assuage local concerns and fears as these arise. To avoid undue suspicion, transparency about methods and aims is essential.

A general rule of ethical research is that the consent of adult caregivers for the participation of children in their care should always be sought. However, as mentioned above, in settings of violence and social upheaval, the young may be required by circumstances to take on the social and economic roles normally the preserve of adults. In such a situation, the ethical issues surrounding consent for children's involvement in research become more complex: should a fifteen-year-old looking after three young siblings following the death of both parents, or a sixteen-year-old soldier, be seen as capable of giving informed consent? And, if not, who has the authority to do so? Should a young person in such a situation be excluded from the opportunity to have their views heard because of the lack of consent by an adult? On the other hand, by failing to engage local adults in consideration of children's best interests, does a researcher reinforce a status quo in which the young are left to fend for themselves? Clearly these are complex ethical issues for which stock responses are not advisable.

Given that the impacts of political violence are often mediated by gender, participation in research activities may entail different risks for boys and girls. For example, in a setting where boys alone are recruited by military groups, local people may suspect them of revealing politically sensitive information when seen to engage with researchers. Sexual violence inflicted particularly (but not exclusively) on girls in the context of armed conflict can render the research encounter painful as traumatic memories are stirred.

In an unstable social and political environment sensitive information must be handled with extreme care. As well as the potential distress it may cause to recollect experiences of abuse and violation, sharing such information may not only lead to stigma and suspicion but also put at risk the safety of children, their families and communities. For example, in situations where the recruitment of children is officially denied, revelation by individual children of their own recruitment or that of peers could place them and their families in great danger.

Confidentiality and anonymity are thus crucial. Photographs and video material raise obvious challenges since they make identification much easier. Consent to the use of cameras for research purposes and to the employment of materials produced must, therefore, be negotiated with great care, ensuring that participants have fully considered the possible implications. In general, if sensitive material is to be shared, the researcher must make sure that its source cannot be traced. Thus it will be vital to ensure that all notes and records are stored securely where they cannot be accessed by unauthorised individuals. Moreover, notes may need to be encrypted in order to conceal identities where such security is not possible. However, doors can be broken down and codes deciphered by political/military actors concerned by the existence of potentially incriminating material. Ideally, all data—both in hard copy and in computer drives—should be removed from the locale of research as soon as possible. For researchers to assume that since such material comes from children, it will not be seen as potentially threatening would be misguided.

### **IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES OF THE RESEARCH ENCOUNTER**

In-depth research can create the opportunity for children to speak about painful experiences or present difficulties and may, therefore, be particularly welcomed by children whose lives have been affected by the horrors of war. However, the recollection of difficult memories might also trigger considerable anguish. Where there is the likelihood of such a situation arising, it is vital that the researcher establishes in advance a system for support and back-up. Appropriately trained staff in a local NGO or community-based organisation may be able to fulfil this role. However, in making such arrangements the researcher must bear in mind the concern for confidentiality mentioned above. He or she must be certain that children will not be placed in a situation where they are compelled to reveal information or express private concerns to people with whom they do not feel comfortable or who will not hold as paramount their best interests.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when experiences of ongoing abuse are revealed, there is a need to assess the situation carefully before attempting to involve outsiders.

Even if there are suitable people at hand to assist with such eventualities, researchers still have a responsibility to interact with children in a careful and supportive manner. It is important to allow them the chance to pause or to change the subject, to express grief in the manner that best suits them, or to withdraw from the research activity altogether.

The expression of interest in the lives, experiences and

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<sup>11</sup> Boyden 2004:249

well-being of children is often very welcome. This is especially often so in situations where children have been deprived of the concern and affection of adults – for example, those living in institutions such as orphanages or in child-headed households. As a result, some children can rapidly develop attachments to the researcher and, not having grasped that the interaction is likely to be short-lived, may feel let down or even abandoned once the research is complete. There is no simple means to avoid such a situation. However, clarity about the extent and nature of the researcher's role is vital.

### **DISSEMINATION**

Special care is needed when it comes to the dissemination of research findings. The views of children may run counter to the interests of adults within the same community, including political-military authorities. Furthermore, open acknowledgement of situations that are formally denied – such as the exploitation of children or incidences of abuse – could place informants in great danger. It may be relatively easy to disguise the identity of informants in a written account. However, during face-to-face verbal dissemination within the immediate location of research one is more likely to run the risk of revealing identities. Therefore, attention is required concerning the ways in which dissemination is undertaken and findings are phrased.

The published representation of findings can have direct consequences for the participants and for their families and wider community. It is possible that whole societies can be stigmatised

by research that paints a particularly dark picture.<sup>12</sup> For example, the depiction of young people as ‘damaged’ or ‘traumatised’ as a result of exposure to conflict may play into stereotypes that are profoundly disempowering and that undermine their strategies for coping with extreme adversity.

Adequate thought must also be given to the ways in which research findings can be returned to children and their communities for their own knowledge and possible use. Here, presentation is a central issue. The style of writing and the employment of images and drawings will have a bearing upon the accessibility and usability of the findings.

### **CHOICE OF METHODS**

Societies severely affected by political violence are inevitably subject to unpredictable events that can compel a researcher to abandon carefully made plans. In an atmosphere of suspicion and fear, rumours can circulate like wildfire leading to a sudden unwillingness of local respondents to engage with an ongoing research exercise. In my own doctoral research in Jordan, (unfounded) rumours that I was spying for the Israeli government quickly circulated through the refugee camp where I had been happily working for a couple of months and led to an abrupt refusal of some parents to my continued interaction with their children. Fortunately, fears were allayed with time but in the immediate term I had to switch my focus to more observational and documentary work (such as analysis of the local school

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<sup>12</sup> Boyden, 2004:245

curriculum). A flexible attitude is essential and this extends to the selection of methods. In a setting of political violence a researcher must be able to adapt, switching from one method to another from amongst a range of tools at her or his disposal in response to changing circumstances. This is not solely a practical matter but also one of ethics: rigidly sticking to a particular approach when it is no longer appropriate can produce risk for both researcher and child participants. For example, insisting on the conduct of one-to-one interviews in private can exacerbate suspicion that sensitive information is being sought or given. In such a situation a more public and transparent approach may be needed to provide reassurance.

No specific method or methodological approach is necessarily more or less ethically sound than any other. Rather, each may entail particular issues when applied in a given context. Space forbids detailed discussion of all possible methods and the ethical concerns that each raises. The aim here is to give a sense of the kinds of issues that need to be considered. The following discussion is organised around the broad distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches, taking as illustration the use of questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) respectively.

Each of the steps in implementing a questionnaire in a setting of political violence can raise ethical concerns. The first challenges have to do with the construction of a representative sample. For example, purposive sampling—in which children who have experienced a particular, usually negative, situation or event, are sought as respondents—entails identifying a specific sub-group who may face stigmatisation or even direct physical

threat as a result. Snowball sampling – by which respondents in a specific target group effect introduction to peers from the same group – could be construed as an effort to induce children to identify others in a similarly vulnerable position. Efforts have been made to find alternative ways to create a representative sample. For example, a large research project conducted in 2004 in four conflict-affected countries experimented with an alternative approach to sampling—so-called ‘Respondent-Driven Sampling’ which entailed offering a gift to children from the target group (in this case those who had been involved with fighting forces) who brought peers from the same target group to the researchers. The author of the report on one of the case study countries, Sri Lanka, offered the following observation about the use of such an approach:

The general view was it could be interpreted as a bribing mechanism and influence [the children’s] responses, and that it would not in general be looked upon favorably by the community. It was also felt that special attention to one particular category of children through the use of an incentive and exclusion of other groups was not appropriate. Hence there were certain dilemmas in attempting to reconcile the needs of scientific research sample selections with an appropriate approach, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics.<sup>13</sup>

All research involves some form of interaction. In settings of political violence, interaction between researchers and children requires particular consideration. Young people may

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13 Honwana, 2006



be vulnerable both in terms of the pain triggered by discussion of certain experiences and as a consequence of sharing information that may implicate others. Thus great skill and sensitivity are required of researchers. They must, for example, be able to read the signs of discomfort on the part of a child and respond accordingly. Sufficient time to allow children to talk through difficult issues at their own pace and to receive reassurance is vital. Due to resource constraints or the volatility of the environment, researchers may be under considerable pressure to complete a certain number of questionnaires within a fixed time period. Such pressure can limit the time available to work with each child in the supportive and flexible manner required. Furthermore, for some researchers, the successful implementation of questionnaires is believed to entail the maintenance of a certain distance from the respondent. In short, the implementation of questionnaires can create specific obstacles for a researcher seeking to promote the kind of atmosphere appropriate to discussion of painful or politically sensitive themes.<sup>14</sup>

In order to engage a large number of respondents, researchers often employ a team of assistants, recruited locally. Such assistants will possess differing levels of experience and the

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<sup>14</sup> A particularly strident view on the use of questionnaires is offered by Barakat and Ellis who write "[t]he researcher must also realise that there are some research techniques that are completely useless in a war situation. The use of a rigidly structured questionnaire will elicit little useful data. In war, people's response to questioning is affected by fear and suspicion, and the appearance of a researcher brandishing a clipboard and survey form will only enforce their concerns and compromise the information elicited." (1996: 154)

opportunity for training may be limited. Moreover, the political loyalties of team members may be unknown—an obvious challenge when the research seeks to elicit information of a politically-charged nature. For example, I have encountered survey research in a war-affected country where the team of local researchers employed by a foreign organisation turned out to include individuals associated with the military group that was responsible for recruiting children and which officially denied the fact. Clearly this raised serious issues about the safety of children who volunteered information about their own experience of recruitment.

Even locally-based lead researchers can struggle to assemble a suitable team, as noted by the authors of a recent article reflecting upon experience in Lebanon:

During war, researchers have limited mobility and limited access to their usual field teams. They often have to join or assemble spontaneous teams quite different from their own. Although such teams commonly comprise motivated members, they may lack the harmony and the experience needed to conduct research efficiently.<sup>15</sup>

As a method, focus group discussion (FGD) has obvious attractions for child researchers. Working with a number of children collectively and employing various fun exercises to stimulate discussion can help to overcome inhibitions. Pursued in a participatory and open-ended manner, FGDs can also offer the

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15 Yamout and Jabbour, 2010, 297

opportunity for mutual learning and the development of collective solutions to problems commonly encountered. Political violence frequently has the effect of breaking social bonds as families and communities become dispersed or fear and suspicion increase. Bringing children together can therefore have a potential psychosocial benefit unrelated to the research itself. FGDs are also commonly seen as more suitable than one-to-one interviews which, aside from other considerations, can provoke suspicion or be intimidating for children who may feel that they have been 'put on the spot' by an unfamiliar adult. To some extent the inevitable imbalance of power between children and a researcher can be mitigated through the use of FGDs. As Boyden and Ennew note:

Focus group discussions provide one way of breaking down the unequal power relationships between adults and children in the research process. In a focus group discussion, child respondents outnumber the adult researchers.<sup>16</sup>

In any setting a focus group discussion will suit those children who, by virtue of personal disposition or because of standing in terms of gender, age, class/caste, ethnicity etc., are able to express themselves freely. On the other hand, at least some children in any group will feel uncomfortable in speaking in front of peers or may feel intimidated by peers with greater social power. A collective approach such as this runs the risk of either exposing individual children to the scrutiny of the

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16 Boyden and Ennew, 1997: 132

group or of silencing those who feel uncomfortable.<sup>17</sup>

Political violence heightens the challenges of focus group discussion to an extent that for some observers it is often rendered impossible.<sup>18</sup> Bringing children together for whatever purpose can be inherently risky, for example when military groups are on the lookout for new recruits and therefore target gatherings of young people. Beyond that, FGDs can be a poor way to explore issues of a politically or personally sensitive nature. At the least, children may feel under pressure to share difficult or potentially incriminating experiences. Sometimes the group dynamic can provoke discussion of topics that were not intended by the researcher and which he or she considers too sensitive or risky, such as the exchange of antagonistic views towards particular parties to the conflict. On such occasions there is a tricky decision to be made: to close down discussion in order to ensure the security of all or allow its continuation in respect of children's right to express themselves as they wish. While terminating or redirecting conversation would seem the safest route, this action might also be considered paternalistic.

Ideally, a researcher would wish to avoid reaching the point where discussion becomes so risky that it may be necessary to consider ending the exchange. Yet even the best prepared and most careful amongst us can be confounded by the direction of

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17 "I urge researchers always at least to consider the voices which may be silenced in the particular group research settings they employ, particularly when working with 'captive populations' where research participants have on-going social relations which may be compromised by public disclosure." Michell, 1999: 36

18 For example, Ennew and Plateau, 1994: 100

conversation when groups of children gather and are given the possibly rare opportunity to talk together. In 2003 I was conducting a FGD with a group of around 25 teenagers in a youth club in eastern Sri Lanka, exploring in deliberately general terms the impact of political violence upon family life. Suddenly, one young woman stood up and started to recount the disappearance of her mother and older sister who had travelled to the Middle East for work several years earlier, never to return. She then sat down and started to cry. Before I could figure out how best to proceed, another young woman stood up and shared a similar story, followed in quick succession by a few others. By this time, I was quite unnerved—although I knew that women in that part of the country often migrated for work due to the death or disablement of male breadwinners and lack of economic opportunity, I had purposefully avoided eliciting personal experience, thinking this might be invasive and painful. However, there was an apparent desire amongst at least some of the participants to share with me and perhaps each other these difficult experiences. How should I respond in order to minimise distress? Was I entitled to terminate the sharing of experiences that participants had offered voluntarily? Ultimately, whose forum was it? My overriding concern quickly became to ensure that those who had spoken would not feel isolated and vulnerable. Feeling fairly sure that the speakers were not alone in their experience, I took a gamble and asked everyone present to indicate if these issues had affected their lives. Almost everyone in the room raised their hands. Immediately after the discussion was finished I anxiously asked one of the youth workers present if they thought that I had

made a terrible mistake and provoked unnecessary distress for the participants. Perhaps in part to reassure me, they responded by saying that although they knew about the situation of each individual present, the young people had never shared their experience with each other and thus had not had the opportunity to realise that they were not alone in their pain. To this day I could not say with any certainty if this was a positive research encounter since its longer-term effects upon those involved were not knowable by me. However, it was a salutary experience that made me more keenly aware of the need to be very careful and alert when conducting focus group discussions.

#### **CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND JUDGEMENT**

In this essay I have sought to stimulate further discussion about the ethics of research with children in situations of political violence. While many of the ethical issues of child research are common across diverse settings—both conflict-affected and more peaceful—the ways in which these issues play out can differ significantly, even from one war zone to another. Yet, the increasing attention to research ethics within academia and amongst practitioners has seemed to create pressure for standardised procedures, such as the use of consent forms. I have argued here instead for sensitivity to context, flexibility and adaptability, focusing on a number of underlying principles of hopefully general relevance.

While handbooks, guidelines and ethics committees are undoubtedly valuable in promoting ethical research practice with conflict-affected children, I would suggest that the most

important single factor is the development of sound judgement. In unstable, remote settings, researchers must respond swiftly to sudden and complex dilemmas in order to ensure the safety and well-being of children. The likelihood of doing this effectively will be increased by rigorous training. But this is only part of the story. It is also vital that the personal integrity and sound judgement of the researcher are encouraged. Given that enquiry into the lives of children living amidst political violence would seem especially likely to be oriented towards their benefit, this might seem a strange point. Yet, like all areas of research this too displays elements of an 'industry' in which considerations of finance and prestige can cloud judgement. In the effort to produce findings of an apparently authoritative nature corners may easily be cut. For example, large organisations such as the United Nations frequently favour statistical data and the rewards for those who provide such data can be great. However, as I have suggested quantitative research pursued through the use of questionnaires can, when applied without immense care, create particular risks for large numbers of children. While the researcher may be keen to pursue such research in a thoroughly sensitive manner, the donor may be unwilling to provide the necessary resources to make this possible, and policy makers may demand the findings as soon as possible. In such a situation, the personal integrity of the researcher is paramount.

In the final analysis, I would argue for the need to consider further the ethics of research in specific relation to the interaction between research, on one hand, and policy-making and practice, on the other. Researchers need to be free to conduct

research in the manner most likely to ensure children's safety and well-being. At the same time, research undertaken without a clear aim to ameliorate the lives of young people in a setting fraught with serious and ongoing risk may also be questioned on ethical grounds.

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## *The power of money—a donor perspective on research ethics*

**RAGNHILD DYBDAHL**  
NORAD

In Norway, the Ministry of Education and Research has the overall responsibility for supporting research and universities as such, but other ministries are responsible for supporting research relevant to their specific sectors. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), partly through its directorate Norad (The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation), therefore provides substantial funding for research and research-related activities that are relevant to foreign and development policy.

What constitutes “research and research related activities” is subject to some debate, and therefore the figures also vary according to definitions and interpretations. However, it is clear that the MFA is one of the major ministries in terms of financial contributions to research in Norway, primarily in the area of international development. The main thematic areas were

health, environment, climate and energy, conflict and fragile states, gender and equality, capital and tax, and agriculture. Support to capacity building for higher education and research in developing countries and cooperation between Norwegian research institutions and their partners in developing countries constituted important activities, for example through NORHED (Norwegian Programme for Capacity Building in Research and Higher Education for Development), launched in September 2012.

Children and cross-cultural issues are part of many of the activities supported by MFA, and much research concerns or involves vulnerable participants in complex situations, such as those characterized by emergencies or poverty. Little attention has been paid to the actual and potential role of the MFA/Norad as a donor and funding agency regarding research ethics. I suggest that the perspective of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and national and international ethical principles and guidelines for research, such as the *Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, law and the humanities* (NESH, 2006), may be useful in this respect.

#### **WHY ALLOCATE MONEY TO RESEARCH AND RESEARCH-RELATED ACTIVITIES?**

At a conference in Kampala, Uganda in 2010, Dr. Phillip Lokel from the Department of Religious Studies at Makerere University eloquently stated: “In academia, there are no favours and no fears”. We know that this is far from the truth, and indeed scholars and students are frequently targets of abuse and violence

(O'Malley, 2010). Corruption and favours far too often take place in universities and in the research and publishing process. However, *the ideal* of “no fears and no favours” is powerful and real. This is one of the reasons why I strongly believe that donors and funders should support and promote scientific research and scholarly communities.

The MFA/Norad support research and research-related activities for several reasons. One of these reasons is to produce new knowledge of high quality, in order to address global challenges and contribute to the common global good of knowledge. A second reason is to strengthen the capacity and competency in Norway, and globally, on issues of relevance to development, which also helps ensure the quality and relevance of Norwegian policy and development cooperation. It is important that developing countries become stronger partners in research and higher education, both for their national development and for the quality and relevance of global research. Third, results of research should be used and communicated, not only in the scientific community, but also more widely in policy development, implementation and evaluation.

#### **A GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE CHALLENGE**

Well-founded knowledge and critical thinking are crucial elements for achieving the aims of development and foreign policy, for example in central areas such as energy, environment and climate change, poverty reduction, human rights, peacebuilding and democracy, and anti-corruption. Often there is a lack of solid knowledge, and too often interventions and policies are built

on anecdotal information, for example regarding psychosocial assistance to war-affected populations (see for example Morris, van Ommeren, Belfer, Saxena & Saraceno, 2007). However, it is also a problem that knowledge is not used well enough as a basis for policies and action, partly due to a failure to communicate findings. Moreover, the potential of the *process* of research and higher education is not fully recognized and exploited. The process of research can contribute in many ways to overall development goals such as strengthening democracy, civil society and peace; or achieving the Millennium Development Goals and fulfilling human rights. Examples of such contributions are:

- Community involvement in all phases of research
- Improving a country's systems and capacities, e.g. through applying for permissions or training research assistants
- Healing through participating (the experience can be useful, and being treated with dignity and respect can be part of rehabilitation)
- Interventions built on best available knowledge
- Action research and scientific evaluations that contribute to human, social and economic development

The global inequality of access and contribution to higher education and research remains a serious challenge. In Africa, scientific results and practice are primarily imported. This means that Africa does not contribute sufficiently to the production of research, and therefore the various research questions, methods,

and results suffer from the lack of African input. For a long time, research was dominated by Europe and North-America—the Minority world—rather than the Majority world, and thereby the concerns and resources of the Majority world were too often ignored. In spite of the recent changes, especially in China, cross-cultural issues continue to be a dimension of the global challenges of knowledge. The ability to share and employ knowledge across countries and cultures demands more than linguistic translation and superficial comparison. Although human rights are universal, the interpretation and effects of implications and behaviour vary and change across cultures and over time.

#### **THE NEED FOR RESEARCH WITH VULNERABLE PARTICIPANTS IN COMPLEX SETTINGS**

If resources are scarce, needs urgent, and conducting research involves a number of ethical challenges, is it still justifiable to carry out research? On condition that quality, cost-effectiveness and ethics are adequately accounted for, there are good reasons to do so. First, sound knowledge of relevance to vulnerable populations in complex settings, including the needs, resources and voices of children, is needed as a basis for national and international policy, planning, prevention, interventions, and evaluation. Second, there is an ethical obligation to understand the effects of interventions, and ensure that resources are used to maximum benefit and that harm is detected and avoided. Third, activities and experiences of relevance to vulnerable populations in complex settings should be described and shared in order to be the subject of scrutiny and learning for others. Fourth, research

of relevance to or involving vulnerable populations in complex settings may play a role in building countries' and communities' capacity in a number of areas, such as education and health.

What constitutes a vulnerable participant has often been discussed, and sometimes challenged, even by the “vulnerable” groups themselves. Generally, the term refers to individuals or groups that have a disempowered position in society (although there are important variations across time and cultures) because of for example age, economic disadvantage, ill-health or minority status. The “vulnerable” are therefore more open to exploitation. The fact that children are viewed as vulnerable in a research context because of their age, in no way implies that children are not resilient, resourceful or important informants and change makers. Moreover, children's right to participate and be heard implies that children also have the right to participate in research, and that only if they are at risk of being harmed, should children be excluded (NESH, 2006).

## **ETHICS**

Research with vulnerable populations always poses ethical challenges, not least in conditions characterized by conflict and lack of resources. Knowledge and awareness of these challenges is important, also for donor agencies, so that appropriate demands are made and good communication is possible. Children are agents and their right to participation is no less real in situations of conflict and disaster.

When research is carried out in a setting that is culturally different from that of the researcher or funder, and where there



are marked differences in power, the issue becomes even more challenging (Hart & Tyrer, 2006). Donors may wish to fund research on issues of particular relevance to their current political priorities in a given country, for example indigenous people, HIV/AIDS or sexual violence. However, donors will need sufficient understanding of the cross-cultural differences attached to the importance and meaning of these issues to guide them in the choice of topics, researchers, time-frame, and use of results. They need sufficient knowledge about the situation of children and of researchers and research institutions. Donors may expect a degree of academic freedom (e.g. choosing researchers based only on merit and submitting results to international journals without censoring results that implied criticism of the current state of affairs) that does not exist in the country, and in fact, may put researchers at risk. It is also worth reflecting over issues relating to the possibility that donors may initiate research projects on issues that are not a local priority (which does not necessarily mean that the research should not be done), by researchers with insufficient skills, knowledge of the context, or independence, or concerning populations that are not in a position to decline participation or benefit from the projects.

Basic principles of research ethics apply no less in complex situations, and include the demand that the research be of high quality. Funders' awareness of this is important, in order to ensure that in vulnerable situations, quality and ethics are not compromised. Quality and ethics are related, as "bad science makes for bad ethics" (Rosenthal, 1999, p. 408). This awareness is important so that funders' emphasis on relevance does not lead

to a compromise in terms of quality. For example, participants should be selected based on scientific principles, not on issues of accessibility, cost, or malleability (Leaning, 2001). Funders must demand that those carrying out research demonstrate sufficient competence and take responsibility for basic ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality and feedback to participants. Other basic principles are Do no harm (including anonymity, confidentiality and protection from danger), fairness and how research must benefit the affected populations. Permissions to carry out research and store data must be obtained in accordance with the laws and norms that go with being a researcher. High standards for obtaining informed consent should be used, particularly in cases of vulnerable participants in complex settings (a good discussion is Leaning, 2001, and the *Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, law and the humanities*, NESH, 2006). For example, guidelines and customs regarding the age at which children give informed consent (in addition to, or even without, their guardians) vary across countries, but research with Norwegian funding must take account of Norwegian guidelines, as well as those in the country where the research is carried out. Other ethical requirements concern recruitment of participants, choice of methods, and authorship. Funding nations and agencies can contribute to solutions concerning these issues in middle and low income countries through capacity building.

#### **DONORS AND THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has uniquely been ratified by nearly all countries. This commitment

to promoting children's rights is important in Norwegian policy. In Norway's position as a donor country, awareness of this commitment also extends to research. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has requested that Norway collaborate with partner countries to strengthen children's rights. Many of the principles from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are useful as guidelines, also for research in complex settings. These include:

- Children should not be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family, home
- In all actions concerning children, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration
- Ensure protection and care as is necessary for children's well-being
- Assure the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child
- Children should be provided with the opportunity to be heard
- Take into account the rights and duties of the child's parent or legal guardians
- Conform with the standards established by competent authorities

These principles are very much in line with ethical guidelines for research, and provide nations, donors and funding agencies with a useful framework for dialogue.

## THE ROLE OF DONORS AND FUNDERS OF RESEARCH

Donors and funders play an important role in setting the agenda for research and research-related activities, including the choice of topics, channels and partners. Although funding research is one important way to influence this agenda, participation in global processes and international dialogues is also useful. By contributing to building local capacity for research ethics through training, cooperation, and support to institutions, donors can have a relatively direct impact. However, donors can also demand that researchers make explicit how the principles and challenges described above are addressed and what measures are taken in order to secure them. These demands can be incorporated when calls for proposals are made, and in specifications for reporting.

Researchers, research institutions and national governments bear a primary responsibility for developing and upholding acceptable research ethical standards. It is not equally obvious to what extent funding agencies are responsible for any harm caused by research ethical shortcomings. However, perhaps more interesting than the responsibility donors have, are the *opportunities* donors have to contribute to research being a force for good. This opportunity is often not fully exploited, and should be taken advantage of for the sake of both participants and research results.

Just as policy makers and bureaucrats expect academics to be alert and critical, there is a potential for bureaucrats and policy makers to be alert and critical regarding research. If funders start asking informed questions about research ethics, this is likely to contribute to higher standards. By being engaged, they are also more likely to contribute to research being communicated and used.

A better understanding of research and research processes is often necessary for donor agencies to fully take advantage of their roles. Similarly, a better understanding of policy making and of the roles and positions of donors may help improve communication and the use of results. Awareness of ethical dilemmas in research and applying the CRC and other ethical standards can be important for countries, ministries, agencies and embassies as well for researchers and research institutions. Better use of the potential that funding agencies and donors have is likely to improve research processes and results to the benefit of participants, researchers and users. These are areas where there is much unexplored potential, and where there is room for cooperation and learning on the part of both the researchers and the donors.

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