INTERVIEWING CHILDREN
An ethical discussion about the imbalance of power and suggestions on how to handle it

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INTRODUCTION

Both historically and internationally Swedish children have been and are considered in good health. However, there is a possible threat to this well-being by the declining mental health of children and youth (SOU 2000). In reports from the County of Norrbotten (Norrbottens Läns Landsting, 2002), the Ministry of schools (Skolverket, 2001) and the Child Psychiatric Committee (SOU 1998) the decreased psychosocial well-being of children and pre-adolescent youth in Sweden is described as a problem area mostly out of an adult perspective. According to Rasmusson (1994) this perspective, although of value, may differ from the child’s subjective point of view. The United Nations Child Convention is underlining the importance of children’s right to voice their opinion in questions concerning themselves (Save the Children, 1992). Children are in the position of not being able, to the same extent as adults, change their life circumstances which makes children to a key group for welfare politics (SOU 2001). A teacher can go on sick leave or change jobs but a schoolchild does not have the same options. Therefore it seems important to close in on the problem of the declining psychosocial well-being in children, ask questions and patiently listen to the ones that should but often don’t, according to the background data, have the lead part - the children.

However, before conducting interviews with children one might want to stop and analyze the methodological choice posing a few questions concerning ethical aspects of this research method. It may also be more than the research method per se that needs to be analyzed as the researcher’s values influence the use of a method. Not long ago I met a researcher that presented
findings from a questionnaire filled out by children age 10-13 years old. When the results did not coincide with the researcher’s opinion the findings were dismissed due to them not being reliable because the children were most likely not telling the truth. Questions that entered my mind were; why would the children lie on one specific question? Where they afraid for repercussions? What had the researcher done to make sure that the children felt safe? Had the children been free to participate or rather free to decline participation and had autonomy been an option? All of these questions raise the point of trust and respect that is the base for research ethics.

PINPOINTING THE AREA AND DEFINING THE AIM

The questions concerning data collection with children in general and interviewing children specifically surfaced within the Arctic Children project, a development and research project of psychosocial well-being of children and youth in the arctic. The overall objective of the project is to develop a supranational network model for promoting the psychosocial well-being, social environment and security of school-aged children in the Barents area. Such a network model will increase dialogue and development efforts – shared learning processes, which will give more emphasis to the health and well-being of children and youth in the Barents area. In the Swedish project group a decision was made by the participating researchers to take on a child perspective, making the schoolchildren’s voices heard in the process. A life-world phenomenological perspective made up the ontological base letting the schoolchildren’s lived experience be the focus of the research. Methodological tools chosen with the intentions of giving children’s life-world justice were open letters in combination with open-ended interviews.

Before interviews are conducted part of the ethical process is to collect informed consent from the schoolchildren. Before one can give their consent an understanding of the role of the interviewee should in a perfect scenario take place, but might not
always be the case. How can a researcher make sure that the written and spoken communication is on a child’s level? Already in this situation, before the interview has taken place, there is not only a question of information and communication but also a question of power. Is the child in a position to decline? Is the child in any way feeling an obligation towards the adult or is the child driven by fear of repercussions? If the child starts participating because it sounded fun but does not feel at ease continuing how comfortable is he or she to say so? Respecting autonomy might be easy to say yes to as a researcher but how is it ensured? No researcher wants their interviewees to decrease in numbers, many times there is even a shortage of subjects to begin with, so is there a line to be drawn between informing children of the importance of their participation in the research project and the fact that they can choose not to? The ethical dilemmas when interviewing children are as noted above quite a few, all of them important to reflect on as well as crucial to address before engaging in research with children. In this paper, however, there will be no intention to address all of them. An important topic of ethical discussion is the interaction between the adult researcher and the child. Eder and Fingerson (2002) point out the power dynamic situation that becomes evident in an interview situation. As an adult conducting research with children one cannot get away from the imbalance of power in this adult/child interaction.

The aim

The aim for this paper is to explore more specifically the power imbalance when interviewing children led by two questions:

1. What are ethical dilemmas concerning the imbalance of power in an interview situation with a child/children?
2. Can these be addressed, and if so how?
Before getting into the actual interaction within the interview situation there are a few things to say about ethical positioning as well as children as research subjects that will have consequences for the interview situation. Plummer’s (1983) positions on research ethics in a broad sense is represented by two categories: the ethical absolutists and the situational relativist. The ethical absolutist views ethical guidelines as a protection for the community as well as for the researcher while the situational relativist on the other hand takes the stand that there are no absolute guidelines but are to be produced in a concrete situation. No argumentation for one or the other was made but instead a middle path between the two was recommended, noting that ethical considerations should be situational as well as context specific. One needs to bear in mind that a danger with this approach is that ethical considerations can be handled on the bases of the researchers’ convenience (ibid).

The researcher carries a set of values and can choose to view the research work to be done on children or with children. James and Prout’s (1995) four “ideal types” (p.99) is a way to explain these different value based views of children and childhood. The four types of values a researcher might adopt are the developing child, the tribal child, the adult child and the social child. The developing child perspective is looking at the child as still evolving and the child’s words might not be considered as important. If elicited the child’s views or opinions are often not trusted. The developmental perspective designates children as incompetent and this strengthens the exclusion of children’s participation in society (Hood, Kelley & Mayhall, 1996). The tribal child perspective sees a child inhabiting its own world, separate from the adult world. The child is a competent actor in their world but since the researcher cannot become a child the child is in some way “unknowable” (James & Prout, 1995, p.99). The adult child perspective views the child as a competent actor in a shared adult centered world. Adults and children are
viewed as basically the same, however social status is not addressed (James & Prout, 1995). Eder and Fingerson (2002) argue researchers lack of understanding of children’s lower status and lack of power in the Western societies poses a problem, as there exists a power dynamic between adults and children. With a perspective of the social child ideal type one sees the child as a research subject comparable with adults but with different competencies which they are confident in using, for example drawings, stories and written work. By letting a child tell about his/her meaning of a drawing or experience in a story gives the researcher an insight into their daily life (James & Prout, 1995). However, Matthews, Limb & Taylor (1998) points out that the sociological view of children focusing on the process of socialization, where the child gradually transforms into an adult is portraying children as evolving and incomplete. This social perspective of children and childhood “promulgate a view that children are mostly passive in creating their futures and that their lives only gain meaning through adult values” (p.312). By acknowledging the power dynamic and obvious imbalance “recognizing the child as a minority group in society” (Hood, Kelley & Maryhall, 1996, p.118) one can address the imbalance of power. It would be better to see children as different rather than lesser argue Morrow and Richards (1996).

The suggestion here and now is to add to James and Prout’s (1995) four ‘ideal types’ yet another choice of viewing children and childhood calling it the empowered child perspective. Adopting this perspective as a researcher one agrees to an active roll in involving children in research, valuing their opinions as well as empowering them to take part in the development of our society. Argumentation for taking on an empowered child perspective as a researcher is presented below.
ETHICAL DILEMMAS WHEN INTERVIEWING CHILDREN AND HOW TO HANDLE THEM

To begin with children are disadvantaged by factors of age, social status and powerlessness (Morrow & Richards, 1996). They are also taught to respect and obey adults (Eder & Fingerson, 2002) and the vulnerability of children raises the need of protection by adults (Morrow & Richards, 1996), which increases children’s helplessness and promotes them to less power. This might become a problem when children are being asked to participate in a research project making free participation and autonomy difficult to convey. According to an ethical law in Sweden informed consent must be collected from children under the age of 18 participating in a research project (SFS 2003).

In the ArctiChildren project this was done through written information to the parents as well as written and oral information to the children. The words used to communicate with the children was tested in a pilot study to ensure that children 10-12 years old could understand the instructions for the open letters and the interviews as well as the written and oral information of free participation and autonomy. The pilot study was found to be useful as the children gave feedback on the written and oral information. Some words in the open letters were changed due to their comments. There was also one child who decided not to participate, and this could be taken as the researcher’s message of free participation was clear enough making the child feel free to decline.

Ensuring autonomy in the interview is also an important part of respecting the child. By making a plan considering children not wanting to participate the children might feel more at ease to decline. Knowing what the child/children will do while the other children in the class are part of the interview needs to be figured out before the fact that somebody is declining the opportunity to participate. By handling this with a sense of “this is natural” and “we respect your choice” the child will be given more freedom to decide. Also by letting the child set the time for the interview, respecting the interviewee saying “I’m tired now, I want to go and
to play” and having the flexibility to come back another day. To give the children freedom of choice when conducting interviews in the ArctiChildren project one week was set aside for interviews making it possible to schedule interviews at different times. During the interviews sensitivity to the child’s signals of being tired or uneasy was kept in mind. One time when the school bell rang in the middle of an interview the child was given the choice to go out with the other children on break or continuing the interview.

Matthews, Limb and Taylor (1998) argues that any interview situation with children is bound by power due to the fact that the adult’s body is larger than the child’s. Morrow and Richards (1996) adds that children are vulnerable because of physical weakness in comparison with adults. By being aware of this power imbalance in the interview providing a comfortable setting might be easier. “When working with children (e.g. one-to-one interview, focus group), trying to sit at their level, not too close, not to distant, in a quiet comfortable place” (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p.318) might decrease the differences in physical size. Since a child is growing the physical size may differ. Obviously there is a difference in physical size between a 7 year old and a 17 year old, which make the power imbalance less of a problem the older a child is. Eder and Fingerson (2002) suggest that starting with observations help the researcher to find a natural context for the interviews. Group interviews are more natural for children and might help children to voice their opinions since they have to argue their point and find support in their friends as they naturally do in everyday interactions. The obvious larger physical size of the adult is toned down in a group setting by the number of children. Using both single and group interviews the researcher might gain different perspectives from a child. When the best time for a group or individual interview is needs to be reflected on and most likely differ from one project to another (ibid).

The gap in age also affects the power dynamic (Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1998). Being asked about things that they have not experienced due to the fact that they come from another generation make it easy for adults to label children ignorant or
even incapable of understanding argues Morrow and Richards (1996). The belief that children are wrong when their views do not conform with adults views is an obstacle to overcome (ibid). A suggestion on how to handle this problem is not taking children for granted or give them provincial status but meeting them with respect underlining that “respect need to become a methodological technique in itself“ (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p.100). The lower status of children in our society has yet another affect on the power dynamic (Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1998). Eder and Fingerson (2002) suggests that by treating the child with respect one empowers the child and builds a ground for mutual exchange. This reciprocity environment is increased by asking open-ended questions, using the children’s own words, terminology and language structure when writing.

In the ArctiChildren project an effort to build an open environment started with the methodological tools chosen to understand children’s life-worlds. Open letters in combination with open-ended interviews were used to collect their lived experience. According to van Manen (1990) when one wants to investigate a phenomenon the most straightforward way to do so is asking individuals to write down their experiences. In addition Dahlberg, Drew and Nyström (2001) suggest that written information can stimulate dialogue about a particular topic. Using the open letters as a foundation ensured that the researcher spoke about the topic at hand from the schoolchildren’s perspectives, as the child’s own words were used to start out the interview. The interviews based on the open letters were open-ended as the researcher tried to understand each child’s lived experience. Questions were asked to aid the child in telling their story, for example; “what happened then?”, ”how did you feel then?”, “what do you think about that?” and “tell me more”. The children were also asked if they would you have written the same story if they wrote the letter the day of the interview. If they would have written something else they were given the opportunity to tell more about it.

Reporting back findings of the research project not only helps validate the researchers interpretation of the interviews but also engages the children in the process (Eder & Fingerson, 2002)
ensuring that the children are not viewed as only informants with the risk of being exploited (Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1998). There are arguments for engaging children even further in the research process involving them in the data collection itself as well as interpreting their own data (ibid). Ground rules to help avoid the “no power feeling” are important and these ground rules can easily be established when the researcher remember a situation when he or she has been without power or in a low-power situation (Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1998). Not correcting or belittling anybody during the interview is one way to ensure an open atmosphere where children dare to speak their mind. Another way of doing research with children is to see one another as partners and thanking children for taking part in the discussions as well as stress the fact that without their assistance there would be no research study or project (ibid).

In the ArctiChildren project taking on an empowered child perspective included being aware of the imbalance of power between the researcher (the adult) and the interviewee (the child), making an effort to minimize its effects. Informing the children about the project and the study as well as their role as an interviewee in an empowering way giving them the option to take part or not was one way to handle the imbalance of power. Another was, as discussed in this paper more in depth, interviewing the children in an open-ended way eliciting their thoughts giving them the chance to influence what was important to talk about. Advantages with this could be understood according to Lippitz (1983) who describe the children being the key to their life-worlds and to successfully unlock their lived experience the researcher needs to participate and communicate with children not as the master of the situation but that of a learner and participant. The empowered child perspective was a read thread through out the research process which included more than giving well thought out information to the children and conducting open-ended interviews.

Before the interviews were held the children wrote open letters, just a few words about how the empowered child perspective was included. The open letters were used as a point of departure for the interviews in an attempt make the children able to choose
what lived experience to share with the researcher. The open letters were made up by open-ended sentences for example “Now I am going to tell you about one time when I felt bad, that was…” and “Now I am going to tell you about one time when I felt good, that was…”. The sentence, presented at the top of the page, was followed by open lines inviting the children to tell their own story, making them in charge of what was important to tell about. With the existing power imbalance it was important to send a message to the children that they had no obligations towards the researcher and also that the researcher was ensuring their privacy as well as keeping their stories confidential. The presentation of the open letters to the children was therefore more of a dialogue about the research process than a presentation to a group of research subjects. The open letters were distributed to the children by the researcher in envelopes to ensure privacy and to increase confidentiality each child was assigned a number only known by the researcher and the child. The children did the writing on their own, making original individual responses possible. The writing was done in school and the children were free to work on their open letters a number of times during one week to give time for reflection.

There was also a decision made to involve the children in the research process returning back to them after analyzing the open letters, asking them to give feedback on the researchers’ thematic understanding. The reason for returning back to the children was twofold, to ensure the trustworthiness in the researchers thematic understanding as well as to empower the participating children sending a message that their participation made the study possible as well as that their stories were valuable.
I am convinced that values are one of the most important aspects of ethics, but also the toughest to make visual. For example, it makes a difference if the researcher believes that children’s thoughts, views and opinions are trustworthy or not. Looking back at James and Prout’s (1995) four “ideal types” (p. 99) a researcher might be viewing the child as a developing child or the one of the social child ideal type. By seeing a child as evolving and incomplete trust in their opinions and experiences will not be strong. Let’s pose that the researcher carries values with, what I chose to call the empowered child perspective, acknowledging the power dynamic and obvious power imbalance between the adult and child the collection of data through interviews will most likely differ, maybe like Rubeinstein Reich (1993). She studied circle time in preschool focusing on preschool children’s experience. At first a statement from a child was dismissed but as she came to think about it the child’s statement made a lot of sense. The point is not to decide whether the child’s utterance has meaning but to identify what the meanings are (ibid). Alard (1996) argues that young people are empowered rather than exploited if there is a genuine desire to listen to what they have to say and if they want to be involved in the first place feeling a concern with the issue at hand. An adult acting as an advocate helping the children verbalize their opinions help this process.

Although changing one’s values is not easy, it is not impossible. I do believe in agreement with Matthews, Limb and Taylor (1998) that discussions about ethics in research, like the one just held, will raise the consciousness of researchers’ values. Ethic discussions are raising awareness, encouraging the refinement of procedures and the honoring of skills as well as challenging values (ibid). When conscious, values are subject to change if desired. I have argued for an empowered child perspective and with that offered some practical suggestions on how to handle the imbalance of power when interviewing children as possible solutions to children’s powerlessness in research.
REFERENCES


