http://www.diva-portal.org

This is the published version of a paper published in *Childhoods Today*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Skånfors, L. (2009)
Ethics in child research: Children's agency and researchers' 'ethical radar'
Childhoods Today, 3(1)

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kau:diva-11326

Ethics in Child Research: Children's Agency and Researchers' 'Ethical Radar'

Lovisa Skånfors

lovisa.skanfors@kau.se

Key words: child research, ethnography, ethics, preschool, children

Introduction

This article reflects on ethical issues encountered during an ethnographic study of 2 – 5-year-old children in preschool, issues which I regard as dilemmas in that they do not suggest any clear answers. These reflections draw on an ongoing study about preschool children's shared knowledge about their social life in preschool, which is part of a larger project about stability and change in preschool children's knowledge domains [1]. The study's theoretical framework lies within the new sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2005; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002), which emphasises that children are not passive objects but rather competent and active agents. Viewing children as having agency means viewing children as capable of reflecting upon and making decisions about things that concern them, and recognizing that their actions have consequences (Mayall, 2002).

If the research involves very young children, however, this perspective on children becomes somewhat problematic when it comes to giving them adequate information concerning, for instance, the opportunity to consent on their own behalf and the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any time. The aim of this article is to present the contemporary ethical debate on research with children, focusing on educational and social contexts and, drawing on illustrations from my research, to show how young children manage the research context. The guiding questions in the article are: What does the ethical debate on research with children involve? and What dilemmas can be encountered when researching with children in preschool? I conclude by suggesting that merely following the research-ethical principles does not seem to be enough; having an 'ethical radar' is also important in research with children.

[1] The project has been funded by the Swedish Research Council, which means that it was ethically approved.

In the conduct of research, there are ethical guidelines to follow. Research ethics can be divided into ethical principles set by law and researchers' personal principles in research (Pring, 2003), which is about the individual researcher's ethical and moral conduct. Since my study was conducted in a Swedish context, I will present the research-ethical principles which Swedish researchers need to adopt. After this, a description of my own considerations will follow.

Research-ethical principles

The research-ethical principles set by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002) are intended to guide researchers when conducting research with and about human beings. These principles are more guidance for the researcher than detailed rules, since the problems can vary with the research involved (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). The researcher's own ethical responsibility is the foundation for all research; for instance, making sure that the research is morally acceptable (Vetenskapsrådet, 2009a). The principles address both the research process and the protection of individual participants, stating that research must be conducted to improve knowledge and research methods, and that the individual research participant must be protected.

These two principles are of equal importance and are meant to reinforce each other when researchers deal with ethical issues. When it comes to protection of the participant, this principle is conceptualised in four elements: information, consent, confidentiality and use. A number of specified rules within these concepts involve the participants' right to be informed about the research aims and their involvement in the research, to decide about their participation, and to be able to withdraw from research at any time and if they choose to do so, without there being any pressure or consequences.

In Sweden, there are no particular rules when it comes to research with children, apart from the principle of informed consent, which states that parents of children under the age of 15 have the right to give informed consent on behalf of their children. However, this choice should be the decision of the actual participant as much as possible and if the child declines in spite of parents' consent, the researcher should listen to the child and exclude her/him from

the research (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). It is also stated that research where children are involved is potentially more problematic and needs to be handled with extra caution, since it is harder to gain informed consent from them because of their limited ability to foresee possible risks and consequences (Vetenskapsrådet, 2009b).

The next section describes the ethics of research with children, drawing on illustrations of some of the ethical dilemmas that arose in my own research with young children.

Ethical research with children

The discussion of ethics in research with children is not a new phenomenon. One key writer is Priscilla Alderson (see for example Alderson and Morrow, 2004) who started a discussion of ethics in research with children from a health perspective, collaborating with researchers in the new field of childhood studies (James et al., 1998). From there, the ethical discussion has expanded to involve the social and educational context. The discussion revolves around fundamental principles - information, consent, confidentiality and use - but is dominated, from different perspectives, by reflections on informed consent and protection of participants. The overview is limited to research on children and research ethics over a 10-year period, and belongs to the theoretical tradition of considering children as competent.

Consent

Much of the concern revolves around whether or not children are competent enough to give informed consent. Farrell argues, for example, that researchers should listen to children as competent participants, which involves respecting their informed consent to participate as well as their right to decline involvement or withdraw from research (Farrell, 2005). When focusing on research conversations with children in primary school, Danby and Farrell discuss children's experiences of providing informed consent and situations where parents override their child's desire to consent. They argue that children are competent enough to choose whether or not to participate (Danby and Farrell, 2005). In the study by Balen *et al* discussing health and social research with children and young people (10-25 years old), they suggest that gatekeeping systems run the risk of undermining the competent child, since parental consent is sought even when the young person is considered fully competent to give consent. To avoid this, they suggest that researchers should engage more with the gatekeepers (Balen

et al., 2006). Backe-Hansen discusses freely given informed consent, risk benefit and confidentiality in relation to small children as participants in surveys and questions whether or not we are too restrictive and afraid of involving children in research.

One concern is that children have the right to participate in research and that parents should not deny them that right. However, the starting point should always be to obtain the parents' informed consent when under-age children participate in research as well as from the children when this is possible (Backe-Hansen, 2002). When reflecting on children as subjects, objects or active actors and participants in research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000), it is argued that although children should be acknowledged as active actors, this must not result in adult neglect of differences between children and adults: 'Respect for children's status as social actors does not diminish adult responsibilities' (2000: 31).

Consent in relation to children's understandings of research information

There seems to be a dilemma regarding how much understanding children can be expected to have of what they are consenting to. The discussion has included what research information should be given to children, listing certain factors requiring attention, such as the research aims, the required time and commitment of the participants, who will know the results, possible feedback to the participants and if confidentiality has been promised to them (Dockett and Perry, 2007).

Children can experience difficulty in understanding such research information, however, and discussions on how to make children's perspective in research visible have paid relatively little attention to this and other ethical dilemmas. There has been some brief discussion of the fact that when it comes to very small children, it is impossible to ask explicitly for their consent; thus researchers must give priority to showing respect for the children and their integrity throughout the process (Johansson, 2003). In relation to a study about peer provocation, the extent to which 8–12-year-old children understood their research rights is discussed (Hurley and Underwood, 2002) with a focus on informed assent, confidentiality and stopping participation. Results show that although the research rights were clearly explained, the children had difficulty in understanding these rights. When discussing research with preschool children, Löfdahl argues that explaining to children what it means to participate in

research from a broader perspective is complicated (Löfdahl, 2007). For example, it is questioned whether or not young children can understand what it means to have their activities analysed and that it is more a question of explaining to children that the researcher is interested in what they, as children, do and that children's informed consent involves allowing, or not allowing, the researcher to get access to their activities in the here-and-now.

Interpreting children's consent is also a complex matter, since their response in terms of 'yes' or 'no' could come from a position of always giving adults an answer, while children's actions over time could be interpreted as expressions of wanting to avoid participating in research. In reflections on research with small children, it is argued that they can have problems understanding research and its possible consequences (Backe-Hansen, 2002). Freely given consent is related to informed consent, since participants should know what it is they are being given the choice to participate in or not. If for example the information is wrongly worded or not fully explained, it is questionable whether participation is optional or at least if the degree of voluntariness is reduced.

Assent and children's indications of rejection

In relation to research with children in institutional settings, Heath *et al* argue that if children are not fully informed of the research topic, informed consent is automatically denied even if children are able to decide about participation, since informed consent exists only when one is fully informed. Instead it becomes a question of *assent*, which refers to a passive acceptance or non-refusal (Heath *et al*., 2007). However, non-refusal may be very different from actually assenting as, for instance, when children are too afraid or confused to refuse (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). According to Backe-Hansen, children should give their assent in addition to the parents, implying that children should be able to deny participation, even if parents have given their consent. Assent demands less competence than consent, and presupposes only a certain understanding of the research process, its aims, and a wish to participate (Backe-Hansen, 2002). Whether a partly-informed decision can count as a decision at all has, however, been questioned (Alderson and Morrow, 2004).

In reflecting upon children's views on social research, and specifically about their being asked to participate, Edwards and Alldred briefly mention that children from a young age can

make informed decisions if they are given information in understandable terms. It is questioned, however, whether children are able to reflect upon and take responsibility for decisions about partaking in research (Edwards and Alldred, 1999). Christensen Haudrup also argues that it is no longer justifiable to insist that children are too small to understand and have a say about the research in which they are participating, if we regard children as social actors (Christensen Haudrup, 2000).

However, Backe-Hansen (2002) questions whether children aged 3-7 are able to give assent related to their language development. Similar questions are raised by Langston *et al* in relation to research with preschool children, which involves very young children who are pre-verbal and who cannot therefore give consent. Whilst such children may show that they dislike taking part in the research in various ways, such as turning away or crying, they may also hide their dislike of partaking in order to please the adults involved (Langston *et al*., 2004). When discussing research with children and young people, it is argued that it is also important to keep an eye open for any indications that they might want to withdraw from the research, even if they do not express it verbally (Alderson, 2004). This would be particularly important in research within specialized settings – for example, with 5–16-year-old children, where assent was gained through the children's positive or negative actions and reactions towards the researcher, which has been argued to be as a useful way of getting agreement since it is thought to transcend language and ability (Cocks, 2006). According to Cocks:

> Seeking assent requires the researcher to remain constantly vigilant to the responses of the child at all times: it is not something gained at the beginning of the research then put aside. It requires time and constant efforts on the part of the researchers, who need to attune themselves to the child's unique communication in order to know when to remove themselves. (Cocks, 2006: 257-258)

These arguments illustrate the fact that problems with assent and consent can arise not just at the start of but during the research process. This has also been shown in relation to discussions about ethical dilemmas in research with older children and young people who are 10-15 years old (Morrow, 2008; Sime, 2008). Here, it is briefly shown how dilemmas regarding consent arose and had to be handled within the research process. This involved,

for instance, responding to a child who had given verbal consent to an interview but who then showed reluctance to participate through non-verbal communication. This discussion is important as it shows that ethical conduct during the research process is as important as it is at the initial gate-keeping stage and that researchers have to be alert to participants' reactions.

The educational research context

Another dilemma involves the research context and how this can affect children's decisions about participation. In relation to research in educational settings in primary and secondary schools, David *et al* discuss how to let children decide for themselves whether or not to participate, instead of obtaining consent from parents and/or teachers. Results show that young people's understandings can be shaped by the context, and suggest that information about consent in educational settings can be understood as education rather than information. Children's decision to participate based on a provision of adequate information in the school setting is therefore more complex than it first appears (David *et al*., 2001). For example, it has been shown that children can experience research as 'just another piece of schoolwork' (Edwards and Alldred, 1999: 279). In relation to children's agency, Heath *et al* argue that although children may appear to have been given a choice about participation, it takes courage to refuse in an institutional context, in which consent 'may be based on little more than a desire to please' (*Heath et al*., 2007: 413) or a fear of potential consequences. They suggest therefore that the institutional conditions in which the research is conducted can often undermine children's rights to decide about participation on their own behalf.

An example is when gatekeepers deny consent or when consent is assumed. They question whether assent ever can be genuinely achieved, for instance, given the subordinate position of children in relation to adult researchers and gatekeepers. When it comes to research with preschool children Langston *et al* discuss issues such as access, consent, interpretations of findings and the methods that are used (Langston *et al*., 2004). They mention that access to children under the age of five has become increasingly complex as children often spend more time in out-of-home settings, and access has to go through many gatekeepers. They also consider parents' consent crucial.

Such issues are illustrated by Morrow and Richards (1996) in an overview on ethical issues related to social research with children (those up to 18 years old) in the context of educational research. They suggest, for instance, that special ethical dilemmas are raised in relation to issues such as the consent process because, it is suggested, children who are required to participate in school research may feel unable to dissent since most activities in school are compulsory (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Such arguments underline the importance of researchers being aware of the impact that the institutional context can have on children's agency in research and the ethical dilemmas raised by this.

The discussion about information, consent and assent is also connected to power relations between researcher and children. From a generational, perspective Robinson and Kellett mention that power relations in child research are reinforced by more general issues that exist between children and adults in society at large (Robinson and Kellett, 2004). Power relations are inherent in relationships between children and adults and cannot be ignored, and researchers need to recognize that children are subordinate to adults (Mayall, 2000). For example, children may find it hard to say no to adults (Backe-Hansen, 2002), to understand the research or maintain their integrity towards researchers and other adults who have given their consent on behalf of the children (Johansson, 2003).

In summary, the ethical debate seems to be dominated by discussions of whether or not children are competent enough to consent on their own behalf, or if they need protection, not least when it comes to very small children, issues that are connected to their competency, and by the fact that the research context can affect children's responses to researchers. These debates also frequently seem to deal with children as if they are an homogeneous and undifferentiated group, or deal with very broad age bands (e.g. 5-11), and it is therefore sometimes difficult to establish to what age of child the considerations relate. In addition, much of the focus is upon the ethical issues raised by the initial gate-keeping process, with relatively little attention being given to those that can occur during the research process. It also seems that there is a relative lack of debate about ethical dilemmas involving preschool children in relation to how researchers' decisions/behaviours in the field can affect children, and the communication between researcher and children.

Empirical examples

In the following section, I will try to contribute to this knowledge by presenting and discussing examples from my own ethnographic study with 2 – 5-year-old children in a preschool setting, during which time my experience has grown. As an ethnographer, I participated in the children's daily lives for a longer period of time, watched what happened, and listened to conversations in order to understand the social processes that were taking place and discover patterns of behaviour and interaction (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Jeffrey and Troman, 2004). One such ongoing social process concerned trying to figure out how to communicate with children about their right to deny participation in the research and how they in turn communicated their wishes to me, which had to be dealt with in the here-and-now.

To protect the participating individuals, a range of ethical issues were taken into account, such as parents' informed consent and the right to confidentiality for the participating individuals to be guaranteed by the use of fabricated names (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). I made regular visits to the preschool on and off during five months, with visits lasting about three hours. Children's shared everyday indoor activities, and their routines during free play and teacher-led activities, were observed and documented through field notes and video recordings. Informal conversations with children were also recorded or written down. The collected data was transcribed as thoroughly as possible, even though at times this was in a more summary form. The material was then analysed as text, regardless of data collection method. Observations took place in rooms where children played and concerned only children from whom I had gained consent. I informed the children that I wanted to learn about their play and that they could reject my presence, and that this would be okay, although I experienced some difficulties in giving the children research information in a comprehensible and interesting way, since they seemed more interested in playing together than in listening to me.

My experiences during my field work suggest that apart from ethical principles, an 'ethical radar' also seems to be necessary throughout the research process and in what follows, examples are given of situations in which my 'ethical radar' reacted to, and made me aware of, something important in the communication between the children and me. I usually asked

the children immediately before observing them if it was okay if I watched them play and used the video camera. If the children said no, this was respected. Some situations arose, however, where I did not ask them for permission - for instance, when I was making more general observations. For the most part, the children accepted that I observed them and used the video camera, and even invited me to do so. To illustrate my argument, however, I will focus on situations in which children may have been expressing resistance to being observed, sometimes clearly and sometimes in more subtle ways. These situations have been gathered into two overall themes: *say no* and *show no*. The latter theme consists in turn of three sub-categories: *non-responding*, *pulling away* and *ignoring*. These themes will be discussed below, together with empirical illustrations.

Say no

This theme refers to situations where the children, in different ways, clearly rejected my request to observe them - for instance, when they said no or told me to leave. The following example illustrates one of these situations:

> Lasse (5), Johan (4) and Sam (3) are playing together in one of the small rooms. It is dark in there. I look inside. The boys are talking about something.
>
> **Lasse**: *I know that. Before you begin this preschool…*
>
> Johan looks in my direction and then Lasse turns towards me.
>
> **Lasse**: *Stop video-recording*.
>
> **Lovisa (me)**: *You want me to stop video-recording you? Okay*.
>
> I turn off the video camera.
>
> **Lasse**: *And go away too*.
>
> Lasse shuts the door.

This example illustrates a situation where it is quite apparent what the boys want. As soon as they see me, the boys ask me to leave, before I have the chance to ask if I could observe them. When this happened the children nonetheless accepted that I observed them later the same day or the next time I came back to the preschool. In relation to children's agency, the example shows that children can speak up for themselves, regardless of the cause.

Show no

For the most part, however, the children did not reject me as explicitly as this. As I have stated, I view children as having agency and therefore I expected that they would be able to act on their wishes and in one way or the other tell or show me their unwillingness to participate. The dilemma ,however, was that I did not know how they would express their wishes when not explicitly *saying* no, so I was forced to use my 'ethical radar' to try to recognise this. The second theme thus refers to situations where children's actions and reactions towards me *showed* a possible resistance against my presence. This theme consists of three sub-categories: *non-responding, pulling away* and *ignoring.* The examples below illustrate how the children showed their agency in other ways than through verbal communication, and it is situations like these that call for the unfolding by researchers of their 'ethical radar', which means being observant about children's actions and reactions, and not just relying on their verbal acceptance.

Non-responding

This category refers to situations where the children did not answer my questions regarding participation in observation, but still seemed to want to convey something. In the following example, two girls wanted me to leave them alone, but did not express it verbally:

> Camilla (5) has just left the breakfast table and goes to the doll room by herself. Many of the children are still eating. I follow her and ask her what she is doing.
>
> **Camilla**: *Maria and I play here*.
>
> Olivia (3) comes into the room.

Olivia: *I want to play in here too*.

Camilla (to Olivia): *But I don't want to play with you.*

Camilla silently busies herself with some toys for a moment while Olivia chats and plays by herself. Camilla goes to the doorway and looks at the breakfast table, as more children are finishing up.

Lovisa (me): *What are you doing Camilla? Are you waiting for someone*?

Camilla smiles but does not respond. Instead she goes to another room and walks around. When Maria (4) comes they walk together to another room and close the door. I open the door and ask if I can come in. The girls smile but do not answer. I ask them if they want to be alone, and Maria nods. I say OK and they close the door.

Camilla is waiting for Maria and she wants to play with her by herself. When asked what she is doing, Camilla does not respond. Neither do either of the girls when I ask if I can come in. In this situation, the girls do not explicitly reject me, but their behaviour towards me makes me suspicious that they do not want me there, which was why I felt the need to ask them explicitly. It is not certain, however, that the girls would have refused my presence if I had not specifically asked them if they wanted to be alone; perhaps they did not dare speak up for themselves. This example shows how the girls nevertheless communicated their unwillingness to participate, and reveals the importance of the researcher using their 'ethical radar'.

Pulling away

As mentioned earlier, most of the time the children accepted me, which meant that I could observe them for an extended time. This category refers to situations where children accepted me, but where they suddenly or after a little while moved to another location. When this happened, I often followed them and continued my observations. In other situations, children pulled away by hiding, for instance behind curtains. The following example is a

situation where some children may be pulling away:

> Johan (4), Rickard (3) and André (3) are playing in a cardboard playhouse in a small room. When I come in, they leave the room. I sit down on the floor, hoping they will return, which Rickard and Johan do after a short while. They continue to play. Sometimes they leave the room but keep returning. André comes in as well. They play around the house and talk to each other indistinctly about what they are doing. The boys crawl into the cardboard house and put a chair in front of the opening. After a short while they come out and leave the room. I sit there for a while but soon leave since it is about to be clean-up time.

In this example, the boys left the room when I come in. This could, of course, have been part of their play, or something else outside my knowledge, but something in their actions made me wonder, afterwards, if this was an expression of their trying to avoid me and my observations. For example, they hid inside the cardboard playhouse, which gave them a place to hide from me and therefore a way of dealing with my (perhaps unwanted) presence. Finally, they left the room and did not return while I was there.

The following example involves a situation where two girls hid under a mattress, which made it difficult for me to see what they were doing or hear what they were saying:

> It is clean-up time before breakfast. I sit in the lounge, observing the ongoing interactions around me. The children are running around, chasing each other. Maria (4) and Smilla (4) walk towards a couch and sit down. They take a mattress that is lying in the couch and put it over their heads. They talk, but due to the high sound level in the room, I cannot hear what they say. They lie down on the couch, still covered with the mattress. I cannot see them; only hear that they are talking quietly. They stay there for about 10 minutes until one of the preschool teachers tells them to help clean up.

The example shows how the girls went to the couch, put a mattress over their heads and talked quietly. Whatever their intentions, the girls made it difficult for me to observe them under the mattress. Of course, I could have asked them what they were doing, but my ‘ethical radar’ reacted to a feeling that the girls wanted to be left alone. Therefore I stayed in my seat

without disturbing them. Could staying under the mattress have been a way for the girls to avoid having their actions observed and documented? Similarly, the children sometimes spoke indistinctly or in a nonsense way, which may have been an attempt to make it hard for me to hear or understand them. Viewed from this perspective, such examples show how children, as agents, can act on what they want.

Ignoring me

The third and last category refers to situations where children simply ignored me and my questions regarding participation or their play. The following example shows one of these situations:

> Sanna (3), Johan (4) and André (3) are playing with a small cardboard playhouse in a room. They have put some wooden boards against the house. I take a look inside.
>
> **Lovisa (me)**: *Hi, what are you doing in here?*
>
> The children do not respond; André just looks at me.
>
> **Johan**: *It (a board) is taller than the house! Wow! Much taller than the house.*
>
> They do not pay any attention to me. I leave the room.

When I asked the children what they are doing, they did not answer me, but rather continued playing and talking to each other, as if I was not there at all. In this situation my 'ethical radar' told me that the children did not want me there, and therefore I decided to leave the room without asking if I could come in and observe them. Ignoring me could have been a way for the children to show me that they did not want me around at that particular moment in time.

In sum, although for the most part the children accepted my observing them, there were situations where they either said 'No' or seemed to 'show' me that they did not want me to observe them, by not responding, pulling away or ignoring me. Seen from this perspective, these examples again show the importance of constant alertness to children's actions and

attitudes towards the researcher, and that the ethics of actual research practice are just as important as gaining initial entry.

Discussion – 'ethical radar' in research with children in preschool

In this article, I have described the contemporary ethical discussion about research with children, as well as shown and discussed illustrations of some important aspects of this from my own research. This ethical discourse appears to be dominated by issues of initial gate-keeping and whether or not children can give informed consent on their own behalf, a discourse that is connected to agency and competency. My theoretical starting point was also that children, as agents, are able to act upon their wishes and somehow tell or show me their willingness or unwillingness to participate and, when it came to my own research, there were generally no problems getting the children's acceptance. However, there were situations where the children seemed to resist being observed, and where my 'ethical radar' alerted me to the various ways in which the children can and do express their resistance.

Preschool children's possible resistance to research

As my data demonstrate, children seem to have different ways of expressing resistance to participation in research, expressions that involved children either explicitly telling me to leave, or showing me their unwillingness to participate by not responding, pulling away or ignoring my presence. If such behaviours are understood as expressions of rejection, it is in such situations that the researcher needs to unfold and take note of what I would like to label their 'ethical radar', which entails being attentive to the children's actions and reactions towards the researcher. It is clear, however, that such actions by children do not necessarily signify their permanent withdrawal from research but that in exercising their agency, a temporary rejection of their participation in the research process seems to be involved. Thus even though children rejected me on one occasion, they readily accepted me again at a later point.

Another reason for their behaviour may simply have been that the children wanted me to stop my questioning them. In either case, the examples show the constant negotiation that needs to be done in research with children because of the nature of their participation, and that this is a continuing process. Thus ethical research practice cannot rely solely on initial

acceptance in the beginning of research, but needs to be attentive to the children during the entire process. As decisions often had to be taken in an instant based on children's vague actions or responses towards me, my ethical 'navigation' often had to trust my feeling that the children seemed uneasy in one way or another. These aspects serve as the basis for why I consider 'ethical radar' to be crucial in research with children, since it requires the researcher to be observant of children's actions and understand these not only in terms of the collection of data, but also in the context of the impact of the research process on their worlds, rather than just relying on children's initial verbal acceptance or consent given by parents.

What does this mean in relation to the competent child, its agency and my 'ethical radar'? Both the Swedish Research Council (2002) and previous research (Backe-Hansen, 2002) argue that parents, who are able to judge the value of the research, must be the starting point in protecting children from becoming involved in something that could prove potentially harmful, which is also my standpoint. Nonetheless, the children's actions in this study show that one cannot rely merely on parents' consent and that the ethical concerns about consent are greater than just the need to protect children. The children in my research seemed able to accept or reject involvement in the research themselves, by showing their willingness or unwillingness to participate in the research at any given moment, in all likelihood based on what they knew and/or felt about my presence. From this perspective children are not passive objects of research. Rather, they can take a stand in their own way and clearly demonstrate their agency in terms of taking decisions about, and acting upon, whether or not they want to be involved in observations, thereby affecting the research.

Power and participation in research with children in preschool

A question that I briefly wish to raise in relation to this is how researchers should act in a situation where parents have denied consent, but where the children express a wish to participate. Although I have no answer to this question, it is worth acknowledging the dilemma it raises. The researcher's power position as well as the research context - in this case the preschool - affects children's choice about participation (Backe-Hansen, 2002; David *et al*., 2001). Besides the right to give informed consent at the outset, however, the ethical principles guiding research entail participants having the right to say no to participation and to withdraw at any time once the research is in progress, without experiencing any consequences

whatsoever. This, however, can become somewhat problematic when researching with children because of the power imbalance between adults and children in general (Mayall, 2002), and in the preschool context in particular. This analysis has shown that even when they have the right to withdraw, children do not often exercise this privilege directly by actually speaking up when wanting to be left out of the observations. Rather, as the above examples show, they made it obvious by other means that my presence was not wanted and under such circumstances, the ethical researcher should proceed as if consent had been temporarily withdrawn.

When it comes to situations where the children had accepted me verbally but their actions/interactions may have indicated otherwise, one could question what children's acceptance really means and how it should be valued. Could it be understood as their not wanting to hurt my feelings? Or did their acceptance derive from a lack of courage to speak up for themselves, possibly connected to a fear of potential consequences if they said 'No', as suggested by Heath et al (2007)? Or is it possible that they did not regard participation as a real choice at all, but as compulsory due to the institutional context, as implied by Morrow and Richards (1996)? This raises another aspect of power, which involves the research context, since the preschool context offers very particular conditions for research.

Firstly, children cannot leave the preschool anytime they want. This means they are forced to deal with the researcher's presence, in one way or another. Secondly, in preschool – as well as in school – many adult-initiated activities are compulsory and children are expected to follow rules and answer to adults. This raises the question of whether they feel able to give a (verbal) refusal to participate. Thirdly, one can ask what scope is there for children to be unobserved in the preschool context, whether they have initially dissented or subsequently try to withdraw once the research is in progress. In my study, three children were not given permission to be included in the study. However, because of the nature of ethnographic research, many of their activities were still observed even if they were not documented, which could well have an effect on the final analysis. This shows the importance of regularly and carefully checking to see if the children are still willing to be observed, which involves being on the look-out for indications that the children would like to withdraw.

Final words

This article has provided more questions than answers. One conclusion I can draw, however, is that research with children offers no easy paths. The ethical principles that guide research with children demand that the research participant must be protected *and* that any research is necessary to improve knowledge and research methods. This means that research involving children cannot simply be ignored, so that this knowledge vanishes, and we cannot stop researching with children just because we find it difficult to get them to respond in a manner set out by adults. Rather, it is we researchers who need to find other ways of taking children's wishes into account, by being attentive to their actions and responses, by using our 'ethical radar', in order to distinguish *children's* ways of expressing acceptance and withdrawal.

Finally, it has been easier said than done to reveal and discuss these dilemmas. When looking back, I recognize that since I did not always ask for the children's acceptance, I sometimes relied on non-refusal rather than children's active consent. If the children did show resistance in the ways described, and I overlooked it, it is possible that I now have knowledge about them that they did not want me to have, which is not easy for me to acknowledge here. The nature of ethnographic research means, however, that many of the insights gained are only understood when the fieldwork is finished, which is a dilemma in itself. On the other hand, it was probably only because of the nature of ethnography that this 'ethical radar' could develop in the first place. It seems important to present these examples, however, in order to explore, and to contribute to the understanding of, some of the ethical problems that can arise, not only during the initial and end-stages of the research process but also whilst actually doing the research with children. Shortcomings in the way such issues are dealt with during the research process can result, in a worst-case scenario, in an immediate violation of the rights of the individual child. In order for us to learn more about such ethical issues in research with children and how to deal with them, therefore, we need to document and discuss such ethical challenges. This article is intended to be a step forward in that direction.

References

Alderson, P. (2004) 'Ethics', in S. Fraser, V. Lewis, S. Ding, M. Kellett and C. Robinson (eds), *Doing research with children and young people*. London: Sage, 97-112

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2004) *Ethics, social research and consulting with children and young people*. Ilford: Barnardo's.

Backe-Hansen, E. (2002) 'Børns deltakelse i spørreskjemaundersøkelser sett i forhold til generelle, forskningsetiske krav'. ('*Children's participation in surveys in relation to general research ethical demands*') In D. Anderson and M. H. Ottosen (eds), *Børn som respondenter. Om børns medvirken i survey* (*Children as respondents. About children's participation in surveys*) (Vol. 02:23, pp. 47-76) Köpenhamn: Socialforskningsinstituttet.

Balen, R., Blyth, E., Calabretto, H., Fraser, C., Horrocks, C. and Manby, M. (2006) 'Involving children in health and social research: "Human becomings" or "active beings" '? *Childhood, 13* (1): 29-48.

Christensen Haudrup, P. (2000) 'Etiske fordringer. Etik og taktik i forskning med børn'. ('*Ethical demands. Ethics and tactics in research with children*') In P. Jörgensen Schulz and J. Kampmann (eds.), *Børn som informanter* (*Children as informants*) Köpenhamn: Børnerådet, 217-233.

Christensen, P. and Prout, A. (2002) 'Working with ethical symmetry in social research with children', *Childhood, 9* (4), 477-497.

Cocks, A. (2006) 'The ethical maze: Finding an inclusive path towards gaining children's agreement to research participation', *Childhood, 13* (2), 247-266.

Corsaro, W. A. (2005) *The sociology of childhood* (2nd edn) Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Danby, S. and Farrell, A. (2005) 'Opening the research conversation'. In A. Farrell (ed.), *Ethical research with children*. New York: Maidenhead, 49-67

David, M., Edwards, R. and Alldred, P. (2001) 'Children and school-based research: "informed consent" or "educated consent" '. *British Educational Research Journal, 27* (3): 347-365.

Dockett, S. and Perry, B. (2007) 'Trusting children's accounts in research'. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 5* (1): 47-63.

Edwards, R. and Alldred, P. (1999) 'Children and young people's views of social research: the case of research on home-school relations'. *Childhood, 6* (2): 261-281.

Farrell, A. (2005) 'New possibilities for ethical research with children'. In A. Farrell (ed.), *Ethical research with children*. New York: Maidenhead, 176-178.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography. Principles in practice.* (2nd edn) London: Routledge.

Heath, S., Charles, V., Crow, G. and Wiles, R. (2007) 'Informed consent, gatekeepers and go-betweens: negotiating consent in child- and youth-oriented institutions', *British Educational Research Journal, 33* (3): 403-417.

Hurley, J. C. and Underwood, M. K. (2002) 'Children's understanding of their research rights before and after debriefing: Informed assent, confidentiality, and stopping participation', *Child Development, 73* (1): 132-143.

James, A., Jenks, C. and Prout, A. (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Jeffrey, B. and Troman, G. (2004) 'Time for ethnography', *British Educational Research Journal, 30* (4): 535-548

Johansson, E. (2003) 'Att närma sig barns perspektiv. Forskares och pedagogers möten med barns perspektiv'. ('*To come near children's perspective. Researchers' and practitioners' encounters with children's perspective*') *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige* (*Educational research in Sweden*) *8* (1-2): 42-57.

Langston, A., Abbott, L., Lewis, V., and Kellett, M. (2004) 'Early Childhood', in S. Fraser, V. Lewis, S. Ding, M. Kellett and C. Robinson (eds), *Doing research with children and young people*. London: Sage. 147-160

Löfdahl, A. (2007) *Kamratkulturer i förskolan - en lek på andras villkor*. (*Peer cultures in the preschool*) Stockholm: Liber.

Mayall, B. (2000) 'Conversations with children: working with generational issues', in P. Christensen and A. James (eds.), *Research with children. Perspectives and practices*. London and New York: Falmer Press.

Mayall, B. (2002) *Towards a sociology for childhood. Thinking from children's lives.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Morrow, V. and Richards, M. (1996) 'The ethics of social research with children: An overview'. *Children and Society, 10*: 90-105.

Morrow, V. (2008) 'Ethical dilemmas in research with children and young people about their social environments', *Children's Geographies, 6* (1): 49-61.

Pring, R. (2003) 'The virtues and vices of an educational researcher', in P. Sikes, J. Nixon and W. Carr (eds), *The moral foundations of educational research: Knowledge, inquiry and values*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. 52-67

Robinson, C. and Kellett, M. (2004) 'Power', in S. Fraser, V. Lewis, S. Ding, M. Kellett and C. Robinson (eds.), *Doing research with children and young people*. London: Sage. 81-96

Sime, D. (2008) 'Ethical and methodological issues in engaging young people living in poverty with participatory research methods', *Children's Geographies, 6* (1): 63-78.

Vetenskapsrådet/The Swedish Research Council (2002) Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning (*Research ethical principles*) Available from

http://www.cm.se/webbshop_vr/pdfer/etikreglerhs.pdf Accessed 23 January, 2009

Vetenskapsrådet/The Swedish Research Council (2009a) Forskarens etik (The researcher's ethics) Available from

http://www.codex.vr.se/oversikter/etik/etik.html Accessed 20 January, 2009

Vetenskapsrådet/The Swedish Research Council (2009b) Forskning som involverar människor: Forskning som involverar barn (Research involving humans: Research involving children) Available from

http://www.codex.uu.se/oversikter/manniskor/barn.html Accessed 21 January, 2009

Woodhead, M. and Faulkner, D. (2000) 'Subjects, objects or participants? Dilemmas of psychological research with children', in P. Christensen and A. James (eds), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices*. London and New York: Falmer Press, 9-35.