

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN CHILD RESEARCH IN LIGHT OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

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The purpose of this article is to discuss the needs and priorities for ethical considerations in research on children. The focus will be on methodological issues in research on a target group that is often described as vulnerable, i.e. children, and especially children with different kinds of disabilities. The focus will also be on ethical considerations in research in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and how these demands are met in reality. There are still many things to be done in order to fulfil the agreements in the CRC, and one question is why member states have not been able to make more powerful changes for children of the world. Children are the future and the time has come when we have to count on children and allow them to have influence in the decision-making that will affect their lives, as most political decisions influence a child's future.

KEYWORDS

U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Ethics, Ethical Considerations, Children, Children's Perspective

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Introduction

It can be inferred from international research that views on children and childhood have changed over time.¹ One reason for this is that a more sociological view of children and childhood is used both in research and in practical work with children. This new approach draws attention to the social competence, capabilities, and diversity of children and their life experiences. Children today are regarded as competent social actors, capable of contributing to decision-making concerning their own lives, and according to Article 12 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), children's voices should always be heard.² The CRC covers all aspects of life and focuses on several general principles, including: civil rights, family matters, health, welfare and education, leisure and cultural activities, and on protection of children in exposed contexts. Further support is given in the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2008) which highlights education and formal schooling for all. The basis is that all children regardless of gender, ethnic background and social or economic factors have the right to be treated like children with equal rights and access to education and mental health on equal conditions.

Melton (2005) states that discussions of children's rights often lapse into symbolic debates, and he is critical of research that relies on what "everybody knows" without looking at sound, empirical evidence. He also demands careful analysis of research results and he stresses that children must first of all be respected as persons. However, research on children from their own perspectives is still limited and one reason for this may be the shortage of tested useful methods reported in child research. Another may be that many countries have had difficulties in implementing the CRC for financial or other reasons.³ Sometimes the reasons why the CRC is not implemented in the states is not really clear or not even discussed.

Qualitative research methods have been used for many years in social sciences and there is no longer debate and competition concerning qualitative versus quantitative research methods.⁴ Often both methods are used in the same study, although quantitative methods are still the most favoured in some countries and some disciplines. The main techniques used in qualitative research are interviews, observations (video observations and observations on the spot, i.e. naturalistic observations) and textual analysis. The focus on qualitative research and descriptive data deals with detailed descriptions of

¹ See, for example: James & Prout, 1997; Sommer, 2005.

² Löfdahl, 2004.

³ Brodin 2008.

⁴ Kvale 1997, 2007.

situations, persons, interactions and observed behaviour.⁵ The research questions are often highlighted as decisive for the choice of research method. Quantitative methods on the other hand measure how many times various phenomena appear and how often an event or phenomenon occurs.⁶

The distinction between these two research traditions lies in the nature of the goals, and in the discussion's focus on assumptions, goals and perspectives and not on the methods per se. This issue relates to the initial formulation of the research questions, but even more to the way theoretical considerations are integrated into research and whether it is intended to substantiate existing theory or to generate new theories.⁷ However, the method used by the researcher is a conscious and vital choice and it will deeply influence the ethical aspects of the study.⁸ For this reason it is necessary for the researcher to consider and elucidate why a certain method has been chosen; openness and transparency need to be stressed. Winter (2006) states that there is a lack of qualitative studies that report more generally the lives, experiences and views of 'looked after' children aged under eight years. The term "looked after children" is defined as children in public care as well as those who live at home with their parents but who are the subject of care orders. Her survey is concerned with 'looked-after' children and suggests that the research strategies need to be widened in order to highlight children's social competences and their own childhood experiences. This is also stressed by James and Prout in 1997 and Walkerdine in 2004. The new strategies and approaches include ethnographic studies, case studies and participatory research methodologies. In order to meet the demands to gain new knowledge, a triangulation of methods based on a sociological model of childhood can be used to stress children's perspectives.⁹

When research on and with children is conducted this is probably even more essential, as children in many respects need extra protection when participating in research.¹⁰ Children constitute a group in society who are for many reasons often regarded as vulnerable; first because they are children, and secondly because they are dependent on adults. They are often underage and given over to care by adults. Other groups with similar dilemmas are the elderly and persons with disabilities.¹¹ The lack of balance in power is evident in interview situations with these populations and it is an ethical issue the researcher must deal with. Awareness of the power balance and the language and communication barriers can help the researcher to be more critical of his/her own performance and procedure, but it can never eliminate the problems completely. One oft-recognized problem is that many children involved in research try to

⁵ Brodin 1991.

⁶ Stancheva-Popkostadinova, 2004.

⁷ Brodin & Renblad, 2000.

⁸ Renblad, 2003.

⁹ Winter 2006.

¹⁰ Ljusberg 2008.

¹¹ Good 2001. See also: Brodin & Renblad 2000.

adapt to what they believe that the researcher wants to hear – they want to behave well and to be obliging. Petersson stated in 1994 that interaction between the research procedure and the ethical considerations is necessary as there are problems of different kinds in all stages of research, i.e. from selection of participants and methods, to conclusions of the results and the publication of them.

The purpose of this article is thus to stress the need for ethical considerations in research on children. The focus will be on methodological issues in research on children and on ethical considerations in relation to the CRC, and how these demands are met in reality.

A Paradigm Shift in Research on Children

A number of studies on children and childhood have been conducted based on information from parents, teachers and other adults in the immediate environment of the child.¹² Few studies to date have been conducted based on children's perspectives.¹³ One exception is a survey conducted by Biggeri, Libanora, Mariani and Menchini in 2006. In their study, which has a bottom-up approach for understanding children's well-being and child poverty, they included about 200 children between 11 and 17 years old from different cultures, social backgrounds and countries. In the study, they built on a list of children's capabilities originally based on Nussbaum's (2003) list of children's ten capabilities and the developed list of 14 capabilities elaborated by Biggeri (2004). The defined capabilities are, according to Biggeri et al.:

- Life and physical health
- Love and care
- Mental well-being
- Bodily integrity and safety
- Social relations
- Participation
- Education
- Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation
- Shelter and environment
- Leisure activities
- Respect
- Religion and identity
- Time-autonomy
- Mobility.¹⁴

¹² Brodin 2008; Halldén 2007.

¹³ Bernehäll Claesson 2004.

¹⁴ Biggeri et al., 2006, pp 65-66

The above components are thus indicators for capabilities, but a relevant question is if capabilities 1, 3 and 14 can be used as measurements for children with disabilities. Many children with disabilities lack physical health and mental well-being and for children with motor disabilities the mobility capability is often limited. We therefore suggest that when this list is used the mentioned capabilities need to be adapted and also cover what has been done to prevent the appearance of a restriction for the child. Only if all restrictions are removed can children be included within a meaningful social life.¹⁵

It is evident, however, that the view of children and the research approach have at present shifted and a genuine interest among many of today's researchers is to find out what the children themselves say, feel, think and experience.¹⁶ This approach is described as 'the children's perspective' and the expression is closely related to the CRC. The convention stresses that children's voices should be heard and highlights the necessity for children to have an opportunity to influence issues related to their own lives.¹⁷

Children's Perspective

It appears from research that there is a difference between 'child perspective' and 'children's perspective.'¹⁸ 'Child perspective' is often described as an adult or outside perspective, while 'children's perspective' is described as an inner or inside perspective, based on the child's own experiences and thoughts. There is thus a paradigm shift, i.e. a new view on children and childhood is evident, and this means that children are regarded as competent social actors.¹⁹ Childhood is regarded as a social construction, contextualised with regard to time, place and culture and varying with social class, gender and socio-economic status.²⁰ Löfdahl stresses that the view on children as competent, and with their own suppositions concerning the world, makes it necessary to develop methods and opportunities for children's voices to be heard. Moore (2000) and Murray (2002) also stress that an insider perspective is essential and that the insider perspective of children's views is often overlooked by service providers in planning, delivery and evaluation. However, it is not unproblematic to highlight children's perspective, as the adult is always the one to interpret the child's utterances. The main question is therefore how adults (parents, teachers, and other persons in their immediate environment) can be more attentive and listen to what the children try to express, as they may not always use the same language as adults do. In this article we will highlight the children's perspectives, i.e. their own perspectives, as a starting point and as much as

¹⁵ Stancheva-Popkostadinova 2004; Stancheva-Popkostadinova & O'Connors 2008.

¹⁶ Brodin 2008; Löfdahl 2004; Brodin & Ljusberg 2008; Stancheva-Popkostadinova 2004.

¹⁷ Halldén, 2007.

¹⁸ See, for example, Ljusberg, 2009; Löfdahl, 2004.

¹⁹ Brodin & Lindstrand, 2008.

²⁰ Sommer, 2005; von Tetzchner, 2005.

possible highlight how a children's perspective is interpreted by a limited number of UN member states and researchers. When we say 'as much as possible', we are aware of the difficulties in our task, as many countries interpret the CRC in the most convenient way with regard to their political and economical conditions. However what is the best for the state is not always best for the child.

Research on and With Children

When researching children in different contexts, there are a large number of ethical issues to take into consideration. In addition to the basic guidelines for research stated by the Swedish Council for Research in Social Science [VR], (2002, 2007), such as requirements on information about the whole research process (informed consent and self-determination, integrity, confidentiality and restricted use of the collected data), there are specific aspects to consider in child research. The researcher has a responsibility to see to it that the children are not being hurt by participating in the research and that their participation is voluntary. Children also have the right to be informed in a way and on a level that they can understand, which means that the information must be adapted and age-appropriate.²¹ The demand for informed consent in research on children also includes their parents and teachers in preschools and schools. They need to give their permission for involving children, who are below the age of 15, in research. Christensen Haudrup (2000) stresses the responsibility of the researcher, and states that the ethical considerations and reflections must be in focus continuously as the conditions may (and often do) change during the research process. This means that the researcher must reflect during the whole research process about whether the basic conditions have changed, and if so, he/she needs to make adaptations in the procedure in accordance with that (VR, 2007).

Children are not small adults, but rather individuals in continuous development. In growing up, children develop emotionally, physically, socially and psychologically. However, children are often regarded as especially vulnerable as they cannot protect their own interests. Therefore, another issue is that the integrity of the child needs to be protected. Ljusberg, Brodin and Lindstrand report that this sometimes includes protection against his/her own parents, as the child's best interest does not always correspond with the parents' best interest.²² Research on or with children always has to be based on a mutual respect and confidence between the interviewer and the interviewee. Ljusberg states that if the child gives confidential information or shares a secret with the researcher

²¹ Bernehäll Claesson, 2004.

²² Ljusberg, Brodin and Lindstrand, 2007.

it must be considered a secret to be kept with respect.²³ There are, however, situations where this rule is difficult to live up to, for example if the child has been exposed to insulting treatment or sexual abuse by other children or adults, or if there is indication that the child has been subjected to criminality.²⁴ However, this is not in focus in this article and will thus not be discussed any further here.

Elbers (2004) points out that there is a discrepancy between the child's expectation and the adult's intentions and this can lead to misunderstandings. Elbers studied the rules and general conventions of interaction and found that children reflect on the rules of interaction and try to construct the communication tools they need for being competent partners in interaction. He states that children's perspective is not considered in reality, and that adults and children have different expectations that must be highlighted and made visible. The different expectations often lead to a clash and the adult often explains the child's behaviour as incompetent instead of analysing the differences in expectations as Elbers states.

Previous research

A literature search in the database EBSCO with the keyword "child convention research" gave no hits, but by excluding research we got 40 hits on 'child convention'. Of these, a majority of the articles were published in 1940-1998 (mainly about rules and implementation). Only eight articles were published in the new millennium. Seven articles focussed on education and exceptional children and were published in 2005. A number of articles have been published on child poverty.²⁵ Their study focussed on asylum-seeking children in Ireland from a perspective of child poverty based on the CRC. A concept related to poverty is 'social exclusion', which may appear due to parental unemployment, or to low-income or asylum-seeking families. For the western world, child poverty is a fairly new concept in research, as poverty has been supposed to be related primarily to developing countries although poverty is a problem in many parts of the world. Also in Sweden there are families with children who are poor and have difficulties paying for the child's excursion at school for instance. However, this problem seems to be small compared to those in developing countries. UN's CRC request the member states to report about the situations in their country and how they have attained the goals in the convention. As an example we will highlight the situation in Bulgaria. From the *Second Periodic Report of Bulgaria to UN* dated June 6th 2008, it appears that Bulgaria was asked to work out strategies aimed at decreasing poverty and redirecting its

²³ Ljusberg (2008)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See, for example, Fanning & Veale, 2004.

allocations of national and regional budgets to make it possible for children to remain in their family environment.²⁶ As the document reads, “Increase support to families with children, in particular for those living in poverty, families caring for children with disabilities and to single-parent households”.²⁷

One article was about the protection of children with respect to asylum seekers in Finland,²⁸ while another focused on the impact of the Shari’a law versus the CRC, as Shari’a also governs family matters of the Muslim population.²⁹ The discussion in that article concerns the impact of Islamic law on the implementation of the UN Convention (1989), and focus is on the rights of children born in or outside wedlock. Therefore most of the literature referred to in this article derives from references in already-published journal articles.

What is evident in research is the stress on Article 12 of the CRC, concerning children’s rights to express their opinions about issues affecting them and to have their voices heard.³⁰ These researchers conducted a pilot study of experiences and perceptions of Australian children with cerebral palsy (CP) and their parents about communication in medical care. From the interviews with the children it appeared that they desired inclusion in consultations with the doctors and wanted information for themselves. Garth and Aroni in 2003 stated that parents and children have similar views on communication but different views on what was important. In order to involve children with disabilities as informants in research, we allow their voices to be heard in expressing their opinions. By listening to parents, children and doctors will hopefully obtain a more holistic view of the issue. This issue was also confirmed by Bernehäll Claesson in 2004, who reported on the daily lives and conditions of children with CP, and by Pickl in 2008, who studied children with severe communication disorders and CP and their parents.

Sweden has ratified the CRC and there is a common opinion among people in general, that Sweden conforms to the convention. In reality this is not true, proven by the many cases in which children have, for different reasons, been expelled from Sweden. This has caused a big discussion in Sweden about the value and interpretation of the CRC as it does not give children the protection they ought to have.³¹ In Bulgaria the recommendations from the Committee to the state is to strengthen the effort to ensure that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them. They recommend that the state should “Ensure that children are provided with the opportunity to be heard in any judicial, including civil (family, divorce) and penal matters...”³² Another problem which is evident in Bulgaria is the big population of Roma children,

²⁶ Second Periodic Report of Bulgaria to UN, (6 June 2008), <CRC/C/BGR/2>

²⁷ Ibid., § 34, p. 8.

²⁸ Nykänen, 2001.

²⁹ Syed, 1998.

³⁰ Garth & Aroni, 2003.

³¹ Brodin, 2008.

³² Second Periodic Report of Bulgaria to UN, (6 June 2008), p. 6.

who in many ways are doubly-discriminated against: firstly because they are children, and secondly because of their ethnic background.³³

Interviewing children

Making interviews with children always involves ethical issues and considerations. Ljusberg, Brodin and Lindstrand (2007) interviewed children between ten and twelve years of age about their school situations. The children involved attended remedial classes, had attention difficulties, and had hyperactive and bullying behaviours. Consequently, the children had difficulties in paying attention to the lessons in school and they were often regarded as troublemakers. The relationship between the researcher and the child is an asymmetric relationship, and this influenced the interview situation. The researcher is empowered to receive confidential information from the child and must take responsibility for the interview situation in order not to worry the child. The results showed that for ethical reasons the researcher sometimes had to ask the child for permission to involve other persons inside or outside of school in order to help the child.

Using Video Recording to Collect Data

It is sometimes problematic to conduct research on children in places like preschools and schools by using video observations. Some parents do not accept that video is used as they do not want their child to be videotaped. For the researcher it may be a problem to avoid including a specific child in the videotape, as children move around in the room. In cases where the focus is on peers, this specific child might appear on the videotape. One way to handle this situation is to discuss it with the parents of the specific child and to try to get their approval. If the parents will not accept it, parts of the videotape cannot be used. Löfdahl studied children's play in preschool by video recording different play situations.³⁴ She had informed the children about her project and most of the children were interested in participating and also found it amusing. When she analysed the data she found that the children in certain situations used certain actions to avoid being video recorded. For instance, they put out the light in the room in order to make it difficult for her to film them. Her conclusion is that it is necessary for the researcher to be conscious and aware of voluntary participation in research, even where children are concerned.³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Löfdahl, 2004.

³⁵ Ibid.

Documentation as Method in Research and Child Care

Today documentation is often used as a working method in the Swedish preschool, and Lindgren and Sparrman report that there are fairly elaborate instructions about the procedure and what this kind of documentation is intended to be used for.³⁶ By documenting the daily activities in preschool, the children, as well as the educators, will get an opportunity to act and react in different situations, and the video material will then provide information to form a basis for new knowledge. The documentation of children in preschool does not take place from the children's perspective but rather from the adult perspective, and it is obviously more essential for the educator than for the children as it can be used for instruction. The documentation often involves different ways to collect information about the children, such as notes, photos, video recordings or collected drawings and other things they produce in preschool. Lindgren and Sparrman are critical of the often non-existing ethical considerations for documentation of the children, and state that the same ethical principles should be used in documentation as in research. They also raise the question of whether documentation will actually result in taking the children's free time and play away, when most of their daily activities are documented. However, there is no ethical discussion going on at present among professionals in preschools concerning what documentation means for the involved children.

Different Priorities of the Convention

All countries prioritize different issues of the CRC and the reasons are mainly based on cultural, traditional, social and economical varieties in the member states. As the CRC is not a law – just a convention - the member states are not forced to follow the convention as soon as they have the intention to do their best to fulfil the goals. In many African countries children have a difficult living situation and there are also reports from South America confirming this. Grugel and Peruzotti state that children's rights in Argentina are governed by the CRC.³⁷ Problems with poverty, unemployment and difficult living conditions for the families influence the children's daily lives. Poverty also has a close relation to education and of the estimated 75 million children in the developing world who receive no primary schooling, about 55% girls.³⁸ In Egypt more than 95% of children not in school are girls. However, current projections for 2015 indicate that in poorer countries at least 29 million children, and probably many more, would be out of school. It appears that the UN agency is critical to the situation and the poor policy-

³⁶ Lindgren and Sparrman, 2003.

³⁷ Grugel and Peruzotti, 2007.

³⁸ UNESCO report, 2007.

making by the governments, but also to the rich countries for failing to fulfil the promises to give assistance.

All Asian countries have ratified the UN Convention but for different reasons they have difficulties in implementing it. Many Asian countries have had a rapid social and economic development and this has led to a raise of the income per capita and to reduced poverty.³⁹ Approximately fifty percent of the children of the world live in Asia. Child abuse has been reported by many countries and stands for both physical and sexual abuse and child labour. The problems seem to vary in various countries and for instance sexual abuse has been reported by Sri Lanka, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea and Nepal.⁴⁰ For India and Pakistan the official figures are limited to the number of children in labour and living on the street. The main problems for the whole of Asia are child labour, abandonment, street children, child trafficking, sexual exploitation and prostitution.⁴¹ While some problems decrease other increase e.g. accidents, pollution, poisoning and child abuse and neglect. Child labour seems to be controversial and in some countries young children work, instead of going to school.⁴² Seven year old children sometimes work in factories and children are often used as household servants, porters in the market, sellers, workers in garment factories and wood-carvers but about one third of these children say that they work in order to help their parents.⁴³ Children are reported to be part of the sex industry in e.g. Philippines and Thailand. O'Brian in 1993 reported that children as young as four years of age are stolen from their parents and trafficked to the Middle East to race camels. The life expectancy of these children is low. The most important element, according to O'Brian, is to provide food, education and shelter and that these countries in the future spend less money on armaments than is the case today. He means that Asia has a lot to learn from western countries about protecting children, but stresses that the West has a lot to learn from the strength of the Asian family who live under difficult living conditions.

Conclusion

Children are vulnerable and when research concerning children takes place it is important to listen to what they have to say. This is both in accordance with the CRC and with ethical principles in research. Most children are dependent on adults and do their best to meet the wishes of adults and this is one reason why it is sometimes problematic to make interviews with children. They want to behave in the way they believe that adults want

³⁹ Browne, 1993.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Brodin & Lindstrand, 2008.

⁴³ Gurry, 1993.

them to and what is evident today is that many researchers try to conduct research from children's own perspectives.⁴⁴ In the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2008) the keywords are: capabilities for wellbeing, promotion of the rights, equalise a child's capabilities and self-determination. "Nothing about us without us" is a goal for the convention.

From this article it also appears that there are still many things to be done in order to fulfil the agreements in the CRC, and one question is why the member states have not been able to make more powerful changes for children of the world. Although Sweden has ratified the CRC, we are not always conforming to it. Many researchers react against the government as they do not follow the intentions of the convention, especially with regard to how the authorities send asylum seeking children away. Children are the future and the time has come when we have to count on children and allow them to have an influence in the decision-making that concerns their lives.

⁴⁴ Brodin, 2008; Löfdahl, 2004; Winter, 2006.

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