

Article:

“You child is just wonderful”: On ethics and access in research with children

by

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Abstract

The need to conduct research not only *on* children, but also *with* children, has gained almost complete acceptance in the social sciences in recent decades. The capturing of the agentic voices of children has resulted in new perspectives on the social world, as well as creating an awareness of the necessity of new ways of doing research. Not least, children's involvement in research has become fraught with ethical issues, visible in the codes and guidelines of research organizations, in addition to being in some contexts – such as Sweden – legally binding Ethical Review Acts. Within the ethical guidelines, there is often a tension between enabling children's voices to be heard, while at the same time protecting them from harm. The “need-for-protection” argument is most visible in the, in most ethical guidelines, recommendations – and sometimes requirements – for informed consent from adult custodians: Access to children's voices is often dependent on an adult custodian's approval.

This article discuss the consequences of the ambiguous view of children in the ethical guidelines – the ambitions to “give voice” while also “protect” – with a point of departure taken in the Swedish context, and in an actual research process of a project on children and care. It shows how the regulation of informed consent through the parent compromises the ideals of child-centred research; firstly, by limiting the child's possibility to opt in to research; secondly, by affecting the relationship between researcher, child and parent in the research encounter; and thirdly, by jeopardizing the child's right to confidentiality. The author argues that we should view not only the child's but also the adult's consent as a “continuous negotiation” and discusses strategies for strengthening the child's right to opt in and participate in research on equal terms.

Introduction

The need to conduct research not only *on* children, but also *with* children, has gained almost complete acceptance in the social sciences in recent decades (Mayall, 2002:121). Together with broader societal calls for “the rights of the child”, the growth and acceptance of what is often called the “New Childhood Studies” perspective have all contributed to new views of children as socially competent actors with unique and important voices that need to be listened to (CRC, 1989; Christensen and James, 2008). At the same time, children’s involvement in research has become an ethical issue fraught with difficulties, which is visible in the codes and guidelines developed by research organizations, as well as in ethical review acts. However, the ambition of “capturing the agentic voice” in New Childhood Studies is not necessarily compatible with the more ambiguous aims of the ethical regulations, thus enabling children’s voices to be heard, while at the same time protecting them from harm. The “need-for-protection” argument is most obvious in the, in most ethical guidelines, recommendations – and sometimes requirements – for informed consent from adult custodians: Access to children’s voices is often dependent on an adult custodian’s – most often parental – approval (Coyne, 2010). The ambiguous aims are especially tricky in social science research on children in intimate contexts, such as the family, in which views on the integrity of the “private sphere” are at work.

In this article, I discuss how the particular case of the Swedish Ethical Review Act works in an actual research encounter with the aim of doing research *with* children.ⁱ In contrast to other national contexts, in which ethical guidelines of different organizations and funders can differ and are seen more as recommendations, the Ethical Review Act of Sweden has been a binding law since 2003 that researchers are obliged to follow. The Swedish case is also an act in which the ambiguity of “giving voice” and “protect” is very apparent, particularly in its stressed requirement for parental consent when doing research with children. While the need for parental consent is not as strong in other national contexts, it is increasingly becoming a recommendation and a practice (Davies, 2008). Thus, given its obligation, the Swedish case and its consequences for research practice are of particular interest in the international debates on ethics and child research. Furthermore, the differences in the possibilities of doing research caused by differing ethical requirements need to

be attended to when comparing studies from different national contexts, or when doing a comparative study involving children.

I argue in the following that the contrasting views of children in research – the “giving voice” and the “protect” arguments, and most importantly the requirement for informed consent through adults, have consequences. Firstly, in relation to *what voices of children are accessed* and thus present in research; and secondly, on *the actual research encounter* and dilemmas facing the researcher in attempting to take the incentive of taking the child’s perspective seriously, while at the same time following the ethical rules and ensuring informed consent through adult custodians. Lastly, I will illustrate my arguments using examples from a research project on children’s narratives on care.

Contrasting ambitions: A children’s voice ethos and the ethical review acts

Research involving children has changed fundamentally in recent decades. Longstanding ideas of children as either outside the scope of social science or (at best) only interesting in their roles as “adults-in-the-making” have been challenged by the developing “New Childhood Studies” framework, in which the child as a social being in him/herself is in focus (Alanen, 1992; Brannen, 1999; James, 2007; Näsman and others, 2008; Christensen and James, 2008; Mayall, 2002; Smart and others, 2001). This emerging view of children brings new theoretical, methodological and ethical questions to the fore. It also represents a new epistemological interest in children’s knowledge, “prioritizing the idea that children have subjective worlds worth researching” (Wyness, 2006: 185), thereby assigning children a capability and competence that was not noticed before (Alanen, 1992). The change is often described as a shift from working “on” children to working “with” children (Mayall, 2002: 121). However, the idea of capturing children’s voices is by no means unproblematic (e.g. James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Lewis, 2010; Spyrou, 2011; Uprichard, 2010). As James (2007) argues, there is a tendency to slip into arguments of childhood research as somehow representing “authentic” voices of children, which risks simplifying and reducing the complexity of children as social actors. Moreover, others have pointed towards the risk of using “children’s needs” and “children’s competences” as excuses for political reforms (Lindgren and Halldén, 2001; Sandin,

2012), not the least of which is problematic in light of the cutbacks in the Welfare State (Wihstutz, 2011). While well aware of these problems, I still want to argue for the necessity of continuing the inclusion of “children’s voices” in research, but doing so with a critical awareness of the production of voices in the research process and the situatedness and complexity of “voices” – be it adult’s or children’s voices (which I have discussed in other writings, e.g. Eldén, 2013; Eldén, in press; see also Alanen, 1992; Spyrou, 2011; Smart, 2009).

The voices of children – how to best “capture” them, what methods to use and how to interpret them – have thus been a central focus in the new childhood studies framework. The view of children as competent agents has also contributed to the acknowledgement of children’s ability to make their own decisions on participating in research. The ethical guidelines of various research and childhood organizations – such as the BSA (British Sociological Association) and the NCB (National Children’s Bureau) – have incorporated the “child competence” argument by arguing for the necessity of informed consent from children and for the child’s right to opt out of the research. However, in guidelines the “competent child” assumption is combined with one of “children in need of protection” through recommendations for adult guardian consent as “good practice”, in addition to the child’s consent (Balén and others, 2006; Davies, 2008).

In the case of Sweden, the ambiguity of “give voice” versus “protect” is highly apparent. Here, all research involving people has been regulated by the Ethical Review Act since 2003 (2003:460). The Act stipulates which research has to be examined by ethical review committees (which is almost all research involving children), but also sets out more general regulations on informed consent, confidentiality and so on. For research involving minors, the Ethical Review Act states that information about the research projectⁱⁱ and consent to participate must be obtained from “the subject’s guardians”. However, the Act also stresses the importance of informing participating children about the research “as far as possible” and – importantly – giving them the right to opt out:

In [...] cases when the subject of the research has not attained the age of 18, the subject’s guardians are to be informed and their consent is to be acquired

[...]. As far as possible, however, the research persons themselves are to be informed about the research. Even if the consent of guardians has been obtained, research may not be carried out if a person who is the subject of the research is younger than 15 years of age, understands what it entails for his or her part and objects to it being carried out. (EPL 18§)

Childhood researchers usually take the appeal for informed consent from children very seriously, and there is an ongoing discussion as to how this consent is acquired (see e.g. Alderson, 1995; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Cocks, 2006; Eriksson and Näsman, 2012; Gallagher and others, 2009). Strategies to make information about the research project accessible (pictures, drawings, etc.) have been developed; it has further been argued that consent from children should not only be obtained when instigating the research, but should be an ongoing negotiation throughout the research encounter, e.g. by being attentive to the child and giving him/her several “opportunities” to opt out during the research process, such as suggesting a break or asking whether the child would rather do something else (Eriksson and Näsman, 2012). The methods chosen can also themselves give the child opportunities to opt out or to drop a sensitive subject (Eldén, 2013).

However, while there has been considerable discussion on the importance of giving children ways to opt out of research, there have been fewer discussions on how to enable children to *opt in* to research. The most obvious – and not uncommon – situation where this question arises is when a child expresses interest in taking part in a particular research project, but the adult custodian – most often the parent – declines consent. Thus, following the ethical review acts or guidelines, the researcher must (or should) in effect deny the child the possibility of participation (cf. Mason and Falloon, 2001; Smart and others, 2001; Coyne, 2010). According to Wyness (2006), these instances reveal the enduring *adultcentrism* of the ethical review acts and guidelines. Here, children are on the one hand “ontologically established as full members of society” as “agents who can choose to take part in research”, and whose “status as agents assures them of a place within [...] a ‘hierarchy of gatekeepers’”, but are simultaneously “located firmly on the bottom rung” within this hierarchy, with parents (and sometimes other adults) being the ones granting access (Wyness, 2006:195). An unavoidable effect of this is a breach of the “child’s right to a voice”, as

not all children have the same possibility to make themselves heard in research. Moreover, this calls for caution in how researchers choose to represent “children’s voices” in research: It is important not to forget those voices that for different reasons – the absence of adult consent being one – are not heard.

In addition, with adult custodians being the gatekeepers for children’s participation, I would argue that discussion of the “work” of the researcher in ensuring the consent of the child should be complemented by discussions of the work of ensuring the consent of the adult custodian. This is an often neglected but (as in the case with the child) ongoing and sometimes delicate negotiation, a pursuit that can get in the way of doing child-centred research.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, the requirement for adult consent prescribed in the ethical review acts, together with the social situation of the child as typically dependent on adults, can jeopardize the child’s right to confidentiality in the research process. This is a particularly difficult aspect when conducting research on children on – and in – intimate settings such as the family.

Research with children in intimate settings

Smart and others (2001) argue that the dominant views of children have previously precluded us from letting children speak for themselves on matters concerning family. Parents were presumed to be able to *talk for* the child on issues concerning family life, and talking to children was viewed as inappropriate, as an intrusion into a private sphere of life (Smart and others, 2001:10; cf. Wyness, 2006:187). Smart and others argue that there is an ethical concern on the part of the family unit at work here, that “speaking to children about personal family matters will somehow unravel, undermine or subvert the family and damage its integrity” (2001: 10). This, they argue, has contributed to the marginalization of children in family sociology and, as Wyness (2006) puts it, resulted in the rather peculiar imbalance in research on children. While the family remains a dominant setting for children in Western societies, given the professional institutions’ greater openness to public gaze, “we probably know much more about children in schools than children within the home” (Wyness, 2006: 187).

Nonetheless, parallel to the development of childhood studies, there have been

important and groundbreaking changes in the field of family sociology. The move away from the functionalist paradigm, with its fixed institutional definitions of “the family”, towards a focus on family as “doing”, as “fluid networks of personal relationships and practices” (Smart and others, 2001: 17; Morgan, 1996; Silva and Smart, 1999), has allowed change and diversity to enter the paradigm. Most importantly, moving away from the assumption of a family as an integrated unit enabled an interest in the perspectives of individual family members – including children (Brannen and others, 2000; Mason and Tipper, 2008): .

Within this formulation, then, children need no longer be invisible; they emerge as fully fledged family members, actively engaged in negotiating their own family practices and relationships. They no longer just belong to families; as reflexive agents of their own lives, they are part of the creation of families. (Smart and others, 2001: 18)

Together, the new developments in both childhood and family studies have stimulated studies on children’s own experiences of family life and related areas. However, this does not mean that ideas about children not being able to correctly report on family matters have disappeared, nor has the concern of parents about letting children speak to researchers. Moreover, following the “good practice” – or in the case of Sweden, the law – of informed consent from parents, these are matters researchers have to deal with in gaining access to children’s voices. To further explore this, I will discuss below my ongoing project on children’s narratives of care in relation to the following three aspects. Firstly, the question of children’s possibilities of opting in; secondly, the “juggling act” performed by the researcher in trying to ensure consent through the parent and the child in the research encounter; and thirdly, the problems of ensuring children the right to confidentiality.

Research in practice

The aim of the current research project is to capture relations of care around children from the child’s point of view (“Relations of care are beyond the ‘family’”; Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research, FAS 2010-0505). In line with recent developments in family studies, the project seeks to decentre the previous dominance of the nuclear family imaginary (cf. van Every, 1999; Roseneil and

Budgeon, 2004; Smart, 2007). It starts with an open approach to where, in what relationships and under what circumstances care for children takes place. Thus, instead of assuming in advance the precedence of the nuclear family and the parental relationship as the hub of care, the project sets this out as an empirical question to test (for a presentation of the results of the study, see Eldén, in press).

The qualitative methods developed for the project have therefore been carefully designed so as not to prioritize discussions about family or parents at the outset, but rather to allow the child a greater freedom when reflecting upon who the important actors are in caring for and about him or her. In short, I conduct an interview with the child using two drawing methods. The first concentrates on the “doing” of the care, with the child’s everyday activities and the everyday caring situations in focus in a “draw-your-day” exercise; the second focuses on relationships, in which the child is asked to put people that care for and about him/her and/or that he/she cares for and about in “concentric circles of closeness” (the methods developed for the project and their potential for giving “voice” to children is discussed in Eldén, 2013).

The aim of the project was to get at a diversity of experiences, to investigate and show different ways of “doing” care in children’s lives, as well as different ways of narrating care on the part of the children. Twenty-three children between the ages 5 to 12 years, and from different socioeconomic, ethnic and family backgrounds,^{iv} took part in the project. Contact with the children was established through their parents,^v who in turn were primarily contacted using the snowball technique (friends of friends and one participating parent or child suggesting another).

In contacting the parents, the project was presented both verbally (over the telephone or through personal contact) and in writing as a project on care for children where I was interested in the many different ways in which children were cared for by parents, “but also by grandparents, siblings, neighbours and nannies”, and that the aim of the study was to “let children tell about care in their everyday lives”, since there are a lot of research on adult’s views on care but few instances in which “children themselves have had a say”.^{vi} I also stressed the child’s right to confidentiality, including in relation to the parents, verbally and in the informed

consent form signed by the parents. The children were informed after the parents, and offered both verbal and written information about the project (see discussion below), and their consent to participate was ensured before beginning the interview as well as continuously during the research encounter.

The choice to use the snowball technique in the project was in fact less of a choice than a necessity that came out of the failure of the initial attempts to establish contact with parents through schools, day care centres and care organizations.^{vii} The reasons for this failure could of course be many, though my impression (given the experience of the contacts with the parents of the children who actually participated, which is further discussed below) was that the topic of the research – care for children – might have been seen as a sensitive issue by some parents. Therefore, to grant permission for their children to participate, a close contact with me as a researcher seemed to be required in order to establish trust. However, as I will show below, the snowball technique turned out to be crucial in gaining access to children whose voices would not have been otherwise heard.

1) Whose voice: Opting in – and being opted out

As stated above, the Swedish Ethical Review Act required consent from parents for a child's participation. In initiating the study, I interpreted this to mean that I had to talk to the parents before approaching the child. As I subsequently learned, this is not always the case, as children are sometimes approached and asked for consent before their parents are contacted. In many ways, this latter approach could be argued as strengthening the child's position to opt into research: If the child states his or her will to opt in, it might make it harder for the parent to refuse consent. Nevertheless, there are pros and cons to both procedures.

On the negative side, the approach I chose gave parents complete control over their child's access to anything to do with the research project. In contacting parents, I was firstly dependent on their interest in the project. Some parents declined access as early as at the outset, stating that they did not think their child would be interested. Secondly, I was dependent on their passing on the information to the child. Information leaflets were sent to parents declaring an interest in the project, one

directed to the parent and one (an easier version) to the child. My dependence on the parent was still total at this stage: I needed the parent to pass on the information (the leaflet, or in the case of smaller children by reading the leaflet) to the child, and of course I could not influence the way the parent presented the project – as a potentially “fun” enterprise for the child, or as something the parents did not like or found interesting or important. When some parents told me that their child had not expressed any interest, I had to accept their reason (although I sometimes suspected that the child had not been asked).

On the positive side, the approach I chose did take protecting the child from possible harm more seriously than the one that asked the child first. Asking the child first would have given me an opportunity to present the project in a way that might have made the child more interested in participating. However, in contrast, I could have put the child in a position where he or she wanted to participate and then had to deal with the refusal of the parent. Apart from disappointing the child, this could also place the child in a position where he/she had to defend his or her willingness to take part to a parent who declines to let the child participate. For example, in a project on children’s conceptions of child abuse (Mason and Falloon, 2001), the ask-the-child-first approach was used; the result was that some children who opted in were not allowed to participate due to their guardian’s refusal of consent. I would argue that projects that deal with family relationships – and particularly parent-child relationships – indeed put children in the potentially difficult position of having to defend his/her willingness to opt in to the parent, thereby reflecting the child’s subordinate position in the family and society at large. And as a researcher, it is practically impossible to know the consequences of a child’s expression of willingness to opt in when one is no longer present.

Whether one chooses to ask the child or the parents first, there is an unavoidable selection of voices, with the parents being the ultimate gatekeepers. However, I would argue that there are ways in which researchers can strengthen the possibilities of children’s agency in relation to opting into research that go beyond the simple dichotomy of “first asking the child” or “first asking the parent”. This awareness came

to me through an unexpected episode that occurred when I conducted interviews for the project^{viii}:

Astor is a seven-year-old boy whose parents I did not contact about the project – Astor contacted me. I was conducting an interview with another child – a girl whom I had come into contact with through the snowball technique (I knew a friend of her mother) – when the girl suddenly remembered that her friend also wanted to participate. After the interview, the girl reminded her mother that Astor wanted to take part in the project, and her mother informed me on how to contact Astor. The mother explained that some days earlier they had spent time with friends – among them Astor and his parents – and had come to talk about my project. Astor became curious and declared to the entire group of adults and children that he also wanted to participate, and he made the girl's mother promise that she would pass on the information to me.

The interview with Astor is one in which many difficult issues of care emerge: his mixed feelings about his parents, his feelings of a lack of care regarding significant adults and his longing for more caring persons in his everyday life. However, Astor's narrative also demonstrates his competence and ability to initiate and form new caring relationships, an agency that one could argue is visible in the way he approached me.

What I could learn from the story of Astor is that to enable and strengthen children's opportunities to opt into research, we might need to think in different ways to develop new and less formal ways of approaching children. Snowball techniques are sometimes frowned upon in research, being viewed as the "easy way out", risking a skewed representation of the research population. However, in this project, the snowballing by the research participants themselves resulted in voices being raised and heard that might not have been otherwise audible. Of course, we do not know whether or not Astor's parents would have consented to his participation had I asked them directly. However, what was apparent through Astor's-, the girl's- and her mother's story was that the "contextual talk" about the project – the fact that there had been many children and adults discussing it – had made Astor voice his willingness to take part, which made it harder for the parents to reject his wish. Making a research project into "a topic to talk about" within a context, especially contexts breaching the isolated family and the adult-child relationship (e.g. by

presenting the project in social activities for children, to groups of peers, in parent-child activities in school and in afterschool care or sports activities), and informing many different actors and on many levels at the same time, enhances the child's possibility to see the research as something he or she can react to (opt in or out of). This makes the parental consent less of a "big issue" compared to the more formal "ask-the-child-first" or "ask-the-adult-first" approaches.

Making it easier for children to "opt in" into research also puts a great responsibility on the researcher to match up to the child's expectations, both in regard to the research encounter and to the output of the research. This is particularly the case when the researcher invites the child to reflect upon and share his/her personal stories.^{ix} The ability to explain the purpose and implication of research in general, and the research project at hand in particular, to the child is crucial (see e.g. Cocks, 2006), and just as in the case of consent, a continuous process during the research encounter. Very few children are familiar with research, not least the amount of time that passes from the interview to the actual reporting of the project, and that the "outcome" of the research might be quite inaccessible to children. However, there has been considerable efforts made recently in research projects involving children and young people on developing new ways of "giving back" to the participants and reporting in ways other than conventional academic writing, e.g. in leaflets with accessible writings and images, or in websites.^x

2) Juggling parents and children

Even so, the questions surrounding consent do not end when the parent gives permission for the researcher to meet the child. On the contrary, I would argue that parental consent is a continuous negotiation – just as with the children. Moreover, it is a negotiation that often has to take place simultaneously as one negotiates the child's informed consent. And importantly, negotiating the consent of the parent can hinder the aim of a child-centred research encounter.

This becomes most apparent in the time I spend with the child and parents before an interview. This is a crucial time for every research encounter, and especially so when

interviewing children (cf. Danby and Farrell, 2005). While often (and hopefully) being a relaxed chat over coffee, this is the time when the child and the parents are simultaneously checking me out: Am I OK, is the project OK, does the child really want to take part and am I sufficiently trustworthy to talk with the child – preferably out of earshot of the parents? However, given the requirement of the parent's consent prior to starting the actual interview with the child – preferably in the form of a signed consent form – I have found that the juggling of my attention between the child and the parent too often lands in favour of the latter.

It is remarkably easy to slip into an adult way of talking and acting at this stage. Aiming for child-centred research means becoming aware of how often adults – myself included – talk to each other as though the children were not there. In the research encounter, I have felt obliged to develop strategies to counter this, e.g. by trying to answer in a way that includes the child in the conversation while listening to and confirming the talk of the parent. In many cases, however, this is difficult, especially when the parent discusses “sensitive issues” such as the child's problems in school, the lack of involvement of an absent parent or the parent's personal problems. Some children take measures to deal with this on their own. For instance, Amy, a lively and talkative eight-year-old living with her mother, makes sure that she gets her space in my fieldwork:

I arrive at Amy's and her mother's place late on a Tuesday afternoon, the same time that they themselves arrive home from afterschool care and work. Amy's mother starts cooking dinner and I help out. She starts to tell me about her and Amy's life, about the difficult situation they have been in for some time, about her being made redundant, about the difficulty making ends meet and problems with her ex-husband and the problems of solving the everyday care situation for Amy. I listen and respond to the mother's story, while simultaneously noting that Amy is circling around me in the kitchen, trying to get my attention. I make some reluctant attempts to include Amy in the conversation. After a while, Amy goes to her room and returns with a board game, insisting that I stop helping her mother and play with her instead. We start playing, still in the kitchen, and I continue to listen to her mother, while also trying to direct my attention to Amy and the board game. The mother then realizes that they have run out of milk and asks Amy to run down to the local store. Amy looks at me inquiringly, and I get the message – I offer to go with her. On our walk to the store I sense how she is carefully checking me out, asking me questions about my life situation.

She wants to hear my opinion on different things, and she soon starts to tell me a little bit about herself, her situation and her concerns.

Of course, not all children are as proactive as Amy in making contact and space for themselves, and in ensuring that their voices are heard. At work here is the very understandable concern on the part of the parents: They are letting me spend time alone with their child and want to assure themselves that I am OK. Of course, there is no guarantee of researchers being “good” and responsible, as trust must always be earned by the researcher. In addition, the parents’ worry needs to be seen in context. Researchers have – historically and maybe even so today – been allied with controlling institutions and authorities, and have had the power to intervene and disrupt families, particularly in relation to families diverging from the white middle-class “norm” (Donzelot, 1979; Skeggs, 1997; Sandin, 2012). With this in mind, the parents’ scepticism towards the researcher is indeed well grounded.^{xi} However, the argument I want to make here is that the delicate task of assuring the parents that “I’m OK” often means diverting from the child-centred ideal of attempting to show the child that I’m there *for them*, to listen to their narratives irrespective of the views of the parents. And also, I do think that we find elements of the adult-centric assumptions of the parent’s right to control and to *speak for* their children on family matters at work here. There is a worry that the child might say something that would show them in a bad light, which indeed potentially challenges the privacy of the home.

This latter point is very obvious in the juggling I sometimes have to engage in *after* the interview. A fairly common reaction from the parents when the child and I have finished is, “So...how did it go?”, which is followed by nervous laughter and sometimes even, “Are you going to call the social services now?” Despite the fact that I have stressed the child’s right to be anonymous (and that the parents have signed an informed consent form stating this, in which I specifically point out that this also applies in relation to parents), they quite often try to tease out something from me. As a way of trying to assure them that nothing “bad” came up, my answer is always a placatory one, “Oh no, we had a wonderful talk, your child is just wonderful” (which is of course true), and then I try to direct the talk away from the interview.

3) Confidentiality and eavesdropping

The post-interview juggling discussed above highlights the problem of ensuring and maintaining the confidentiality of children participating in research. The absolute standpoint of never breaching confidentiality is often rather difficult for the researcher conducting research in family settings, particularly when parents are pushy and one still needs them to be “positive” to grant the child’s continued participation.

The problems of granting the child confidentiality also emerge during the interview with the child in the not uncommon eavesdropping by the parent. In theory, this is straightforward: One simply states that one wishes to talk to the child in private, behind closed doors, e.g. in the child’s room. In reality, one often has to compromise, as it is sometimes not possible to conduct the interview out of the earshot of the parents – because of space limitations (small flats, no doors), because the child does not want to or because the parents choose to stay close by. As Wyness argues, adults’ control of space means that they often have the power to regulate the child’s privacy in the encounter with the researcher – “[p]rivacy is a common good to which adults have access” and children have to negotiate access to this space (Wyness, 2006: 193). Again, as a researcher I have to take into account the very real concern of the parent of me being “OK”: if I emphasize too strongly the wish to be alone with the child, there is a risk of the parent withdrawing the child from the research. The only solution in such cases is to compromise on the issue of privacy and carry out the research, knowing that the parents are listening and therefore also compromising the child’s right to confidentiality:

Anna, a 10-year-old girl, lives with her father in a three-bedroom flat. The rooms are quite small, and to help make ends meet, Anna and her father have a lodger who rents one of the rooms. During the interview with Anna, both the father and the lodger are at home (the lodger is in her room). When getting ready to start the interview after some initial chitchat, Anna’s father suggests that we sit in the living room. Anna’s own room is very small and “very untidy”, the father says with a knowing look. Since this seems to be Anna’s wish too (she sits down on the couch straight away), I agree to this arrangement. During the interview, the father moves around in the flat. At the beginning, he is in his own bedroom, but after a while he sits in the kitchen, reading the newspaper. There is no door between the kitchen and the living room, and I am not sure

how much of Anna's and my conversation he can hear, which makes me feel uneasy. Nor am I sure whether Anna is as aware as I am that he might be within earshot. Eventually, my worries are confirmed: When Anna tells me rather late in the interview about her absent mother, the father appears from the kitchen to "help out" and explain to me her whereabouts.

This incident highlights the difficulty of implementing the child's right to confidentiality in the research encounter, illustrating children's lack of control over space and privacy, and how this lack of control "spills over" onto the researcher in the research encounter. I want to argue that as a researcher (especially when one is interviewing children on potentially sensitive matters), one needs to develop strategies to deal with this lack of control. When a private space for the research encounter is not possible for some reason, the researcher needs to be extra attentive to the child's situation. If one suspects that a parent is listening in, the researcher can draw the child's attention to this (e.g. by saying something to the parent such as asking for more coffee, or by directly pointing out that "mum's in the next room"), thus attempting to ensure that the child will not tell you something that will get them into trouble afterwards. Of course, this means that some questions might not be addressed in the interview and that the child might not share all of his or her thoughts. But it is a necessary compromise, given that the safety of the child is always paramount.^{xii}

In addition, problems of confidentiality emerge in relation to the unavoidable giving-away of the child as a result of the requirement for informed consent through adult guardians. Adults participating in research can in most cases control who (if anyone) knows of his/her participation, hence minimizing the risk that someone will recognize their narratives. This is not the case for children. The fact that the parents will always know that their child is participating in a certain research project means a huge undertaking for the researcher to ensure that parents cannot identify the utterances of their children. When the research – as in my case – is about family and personal life, and furthermore is qualitative and seeks to reveal children's complex narratives of their everyday life, this is almost impossible. When deciding whether a certain child's narrative should be presented in the research publication, the researcher not only has to change names, places and circumstances, but must also try to imagine

whether the narrative could be identified by the parents and – if there is a risk of that happening – if the narrative could in any way result in harm to the child if the parent read it.

Conclusion

Including children's voices in research is a very important and pressing – although not uncomplicated – task facing the social sciences. It is also a task that raises new questions, not least ethical ones. Taking the argument for child-centred research seriously means critically examining whether our ways of carrying out research really measure up to this ideal. In this article, I have shown how there are conflicting assumptions about “the child” in the ethical guidelines and review acts – on the one hand of children as agentic, and on the other in need of protection from – and thus subordinated to – adult guardians. All of this impacts the possibilities of conducting child-centred research. By looking at the case of Sweden, where the Ethical Review Act clearly encompasses the ambiguity of “voice” versus “protection” through its requirement of informed consent from both children and legal custodians, I have highlighted the consequences of the requirement for parental consent in relation to children's possibilities of opting into research, as well as in the actual research encounter – the “juggling” work of getting consent from both parents and children – and also the (im)possibilities of granting children full confidentiality. What becomes obvious in this discussion is that the protective aim of an ethical review act can impede both the researcher's and children's actions in the research encounter. In turn, this can affect the quality of the research produced. I am not arguing for a removal of the requirement for parental consent in the case of Sweden. As has been argued, there are good reasons for this requirement and no guarantee of all research (or all researchers) being “good”. Nevertheless, I do think we need to critically evaluate and discuss its consequences. Firstly, we need to ask: Who is this requirement protecting? In some cases – and often in research in intimate settings such as the family – the protected subject might actually be the integrity of the “private sphere” rather than the child. Secondly, we need to look critically at how this requirement is interfering with the aim of conducting child-centred research under the ethical rules and/or guidelines of different national contexts. In so doing we can become aware of the limits of our own research (e.g. whose voice is represented,

and under what circumstances it is expressed), and how different ethical standards affect the conditions under which the research is carried out. We can also – cross nationally – develop and share ideas and strategies on how to strengthen children’s rights in research, to opt in and participate, to be at the centre of the research encounter and to be granted the same right to confidentiality as adult research subjects.

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ⁱⁱ This includes the overall plan for the research, its purpose, the methods that will be used, the consequences and risks of the research, the identity of the responsible research body, the fact that participation in the research is voluntary and the right of the research subject to cease participating at any time.

ⁱⁱⁱ An important exception is Coyne's article (2010) on parental consent requirements in research, where a number of problems of parental consent are discussed (e.g. assumptions of children's incapacity to understand, the parent's ability to assess risk and the parental consent requirement as blocking children's participation). However, Coyne is not discussing the particular problems that arise in research in intimate settings such as the family.

^{iv} The participating children came from family situations with heterosexual and homosexual parents living together, separated or single parents and children living in co-housing.

^v In all cases, the legal custodians of the participating children were parents of the child. In the following, I will therefore refer to "parents" when talking about legal custodians.

^{vi} Quote from the information leaflet and informed consent form of the project, translation from Swedish by the author.

^{vii} Two of the participating children had parents who contacted me after I had posted information of the project on a Single Parent Association website. To get a diverse sample, I also unsuccessfully attempted to contact parents through LGBT websites, but in the end, the participating children from LGBT families were recruited through use of the snowball technique.

^{viii} The data presented below are retrospective reflections based on the field notes I gathered during and after every research encounter. All the names and some of the circumstances of the children and parents have been changed to avoid identification.

^{ix} The researcher also needs to be prepared for the possibility that the child shares information that might indicate that the child is at risk, information that might also make it necessary to breach the promise of confidentiality and report the family to the authorities. Researchers are not required to report suspected cases of children “at risk” (compared to e.g. social workers and teachers), but I argue that for ethical reasons any research involving children needs to be prepared for the possibility of this occurring. In this particular project, a social worker has been acting as a “background consultant” in the project. The social worker was informed of the aims and methods of the project before initiating it, and could be asked for advice on how to handle cases “at risk”.

^x See, e.g. the “Young People Creating Belonging: Spaces, Sounds and Sight”- project (Dr. Sarah Wilson; <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-061-25-0501/read>). Similar ways of reporting back will be used in this project.

^{xi} Interestingly, in this project, the “worrying” parents were more likely to be middle class, something that might be explained by new ideals in parenting, see e.g. Johansson, 2007.

^{xii} However, some researchers have argued that eavesdropping in interviews with children could actually contribute to better data by initiating discussions among family members on the topic at hand (Mason and Tipper, 2008).