



WORKING WITH ETHICAL SYMMETRY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

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The perspective of ‘children as social actors’ has created a field with new ethical dilemmas and responsibilities for researchers within the social study of childhood. These concern, for example, the greater potential for conflicts of interest, often hitherto unrecognized, between children and other actors. It is suggested to work from a perspective of ‘ethical symmetry’ in research relationships with children while taking into account the social and cultural positioning of children in their particular circumstances. An illustrative example is given of the ethical issues that can arise when children are seen as social actors. It is argued that codes of ethics, reflexivity and collective professional responsibility are all required in order to meet the ethical demands that flow from these newer perspectives on children. It is proposed, therefore, that researchers develop a set of strategic values within which individual researchers can anchor the tactics required in their everyday practice in order to work reflexively. Finally, it is suggested that, in order to develop ethical practice for the future, dialogue is required on two levels: between researchers as a means of collectively sharing experience; and between researchers and children as participants in the ongoing research process.

Introduction

Internationally, the social study of children is a wide interdisciplinary field located within the human and social sciences. Over the last two decades new theoretical perspectives (see, for example, James et al., 1999) have been developed that focus, in various ways, on children as social actors. Although not comprehensively replacing older ones, indeed often uneasily coexisting with them, these new perspectives have resulted in an upsurge of new empirical research. This in turn has involved innovative research methods and widening methodological discussion (Christensen and James, 2000a).

Although this effort has built up a significant experience of studying children, it has paid relatively little attention to the ethical issues that arise from the new perspectives. There are some important exceptions to this. Alderson (1995) has raised key questions for researchers through a valuable set of ethical guidelines (see also National Children's Bureau, 2001; Qualidata, 2001). Morrow and Richards (1996) have explored issues of access and consent, while Thomas and O'Kane (1998) have suggested that participatory techniques can overcome many ethical problems in working with children. Ethnographers have written about the responsibility of the individual researcher to monitor and respond to ethical issues in fieldwork (Davis, 1998; Eder and Corsaro, 1999).

In this article we extend these discussions by arguing that new ethical issues inevitably arise from seeing children as social actors. The theoretical orientations through which social science constitutes children bring with them ethical implications.¹ Once children are seen as social actors, a more complex field emerges in which there is greater scope for ethical dilemmas and new responsibilities for researchers. In response, we suggest that ethical considerations start with what we term 'ethical symmetry' between children and adults. The implications of this need to be worked out in both a shared set of orienting values within the social science childhood research community and within the context of any particular piece of research, which must consider the application of general values to specific circumstances. While both general codes of ethics and individual responsibility are required, it is essential that these be linked through a wider discussion of ethics that is placed more centrally in the professional activities of childhood researchers. A dialogue with children throughout the research process, we suggest, is an essential component of this work.

Ethics, social theory and childhood

Ethical questions about how to conduct research are deeply connected with the content of social theory. In this respect it is noticeable that, after a long period on the sidelines, ethical questions have recently begun to take a more central place in social theorizing. Arguably the fragmentation of social structures and the decline of overarching moral and political systems that are said to characterize late modernity have compelled such a re-examination of the ethical side of social life. Frameworks for judging the moral status of social action are unsettled by markedly greater levels of individualized consciousness and the 'hollowing out' of traditional institutions in contemporary society. Numerous writers on social theory have grappled with these themes in recent times. Giddens (1998), for instance, argues that late modern social democratic politics require the clarification of value consensus rather than its dissipation into individual volition. In similar vein, Rorty (1992) rejects the necessity of accepting a postmodern cataclysm of values, arguing that we do

not have to choose between moral absolutism and moral nihilism. Bauman (1993) also argues that, in the face of the withering of moral grand narratives, individual responsibility must be interpellated into a social and collective context.

The personalization of ethics is not a new philosophical theme in the 20th, or even the 19th, century. In fact ethical debate about the relative weight to be given to general rules compared with particular circumstances has a long history. Philosophers from Kierkegård to Sartre have challenged the primacy of system over individual, arguing for the inescapable responsibility of the individual to interpret rules and make their own ethical choices. In the 1960s, 'situational ethics' advocated the simplification of moral principles, their stripping down to the most basic axioms so that the individual is given the freedom, flexibility and responsibility to work out their meaning in a specific set of circumstances (Fletcher, 1966). What seems different about the current discussion is that it sees the individualization of ethics as bound up with a wide set of contemporary social changes (at the extreme characterized as epochal ones – see Harvey, 1989: 327–8) and, at the same time, seeks for ways to overcome their potentially negative consequences by reinstating the importance of a collective dimension to moral questions, one that neither looks back to tradition nor collapses into solipsism.

In this respect, Bauman is especially interesting for scholars of childhood because he links the development of new forms of individual and collective ethical sensibility with the exhaustion of the Enlightenment project. According to him the central social challenge of postmodern times is to take responsibility for the Other, that is minority groups and other people who have hitherto been excluded from a full part in post-Enlightenment rationality. Children, though not specifically mentioned by him (or for that matter any of the other social theorists mentioned above), have, nevertheless, been identified in this way by sociologists of childhood. Jenks (1982: 9), for example, makes a now widely recognized argument exactly to the effect that children are an Other that modernity has found hard to embrace.

For this reason, there are definite parallels between Bauman's argument about including the Other and the view of children as social actors propounded by the latest social science studies of childhood. For example, Bauman carefully distinguishes between taking responsibility *for* and taking responsibility away *from* the Other. The latter is a form of paternalistic control recognizable, we suggest, in many adult practices towards children. Bauman argues that it is important not to reduce the Other to the Same, just as recognizing children as social actors does not justify treating children as if they were the same as adults (for example, in terms of wealth, power or creative energy). He strongly argues against treating the Other as if they were reducible to some generalized characteristic, just as, in the case of children, writers in the sociology of childhood have argued against seeing children as essentially vulnerable (Christensen, 2000) or incompetent (Hutchby and

Moran-Ellis, 1998). Rather, he argues, as we do in a later section in relation to the ethics of social research with children, that taking responsibility means entering a dialogue that recognizes commonality but also honours difference.

Four perspectives on children in research

Four ways of seeing children and childhood have been identified in research on children: the child as object, the child as subject and the child as social actor (Christensen, 1998; Christensen and James, 2000a) and a nascent approach seeing children as participants and co-researchers (Alderson, 2000; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). The first two of these form a long-standing part of the social science tradition whilst the last two have a more recent provenance. These perspectives coexist; they do not form a neat progression but are used alongside each other in contemporary research. This creates not only a diverse range of research conducted on or with children but also means that sometimes practices stemming from one orientation become mixed together with practices of another, often by default when the ethical implications of newer approaches are not consistently thought through.

The most traditional, and still very common approach, has been to see the child as object, that is as a person acted upon by others, rather than as a subject acting in the world. This approach more or less neglects the understanding of children as social persons in their own right. It is based on the assumption of children's dependency. Their lives and welfare are therefore investigated from the perspectives of adults, obtaining accounts of parents, teachers and others involved with the care of the child. The methodological design reflects a genuine, if often paternalistic, desire to protect children as essentially incompetent or vulnerable beings. This is exemplified in researchers being suspicious of children's trustworthiness and doubtful of their ability to give and receive factual information. Children are perceived as incompetent and accordingly unable to understand the idea of the research, lacking the ability to consent to it or have a voice in its design, implementation and interpretation. Insofar as children are seen as having invested interests in the research carried out about them, these are delegated to responsible adults, usually parents but also sometimes professionals such as social workers and teachers. However, these adults are not seen as having any duty to consult children. On the contrary, their adult status and relationship to the child are seen, in normal circumstances, as the guarantors of children's welfare.

Developing alongside this research tradition is an approach that challenges it by acknowledging children as subjects. Key to this 'child-centred' perspective is that it recognizes the child as a person with subjectivity and takes this as its starting point. More recent developmental psychology is often concerned to do this (see Woodhead and Faulkner [2000] for exam-

ples). However, within this orientation a child's involvement in research is conditioned by judgements about their cognitive abilities and social competencies. The researcher who wants to involve children themselves as informants needs, therefore, to assess and pay careful attention to children's development and maturity. This approach will commonly use age-based criteria in inclusion or exclusion of particular children and when adopting particular methodological techniques.

The third, and relatively new, approach has similarly involved seeing children as subjects rather than objects in research, but this recognition has been extended to see children as social actors with their own experiences and understandings. Children are seen to act, take part in, change and become changed by the social and cultural world they live in. A common characteristic of this research perspective is that children are given central and autonomous conceptual status (see, among others, Corsaro, 1997; Prout and James, 1990; Thorne, 1993). Analytically, children are, therefore, no longer seen solely as part of the family or the school, social institutions and relationships upon which children traditionally are seen as dependent. A key feature of this third approach is that it does not take any distinction between adults and children for granted. For example, when it comes to choosing methods for working with children the basic principle is as it would be with any other piece of research (with adults). The particular methods employed must suit the persons involved in the study, the kind of questions that one wishes to investigate and the specific social and cultural context of the research (Christensen and James, 2000a).

Currently developing from the perspective of children as social actors is a fourth approach that constitutes children as active participants in the research process, as they are in societal life (Alderson, 2000; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). This perspective has support in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), especially those sections emphasizing children's participation rights. The CRC underlines that all activities (including research) that affect children's lives have to build on seeing children as fellow human beings and as active citizens. It promotes the idea that children be involved, informed, consulted and heard. This approach is paralleled in new social science methodologies that see research as a co-production contributed to by both researcher and informant. Following from these conceptual developments is the idea that children should increasingly become involved as co-researchers.

The ethical challenge of research with children

It is clear from this that the perspective on children that a researcher works with has important implications for his or her research practice. It influences the choice of methods (including the researcher's role), the analysis and interpretation of data as well as ethical practice. In some ways the shift from

seeing children as objects, then subjects, and, contemporaneously, as social actors can be seen as unsettling previously unquestioned research practices and understandings. The approach that sees children as objects depends, and in part relies, on the exclusion of children from a voice in research. The emergence of children as social actors (or participants and co-researchers), however, has significantly changed the position of children within the social and cultural sciences. It has contributed to a weakening of taken-for-granted assumptions and ideas about children that still pervade the field as a whole. That children themselves have a voice in matters from which they were once excluded has added new complexities and uncertainties to the research process by interposing a new actor and thus a new set of social relations into the field. Children must be considered as having a set of specific interests that stand in relation to the existing social actors: for example, parents, teachers, politicians, researchers and others. This does not merely *add* to the complexity of the field, but rather *multiplies* it. It proliferates the number of cross-cutting relationships and expands the possibility that interests may come into conflict. This is likely to create not only new ethical problems and dilemmas for the researcher, but also particular responsibilities.

An important implication of this shift is the need to expand the range of issues that are included in ethical discussions about research involving children. Many discussions of research methods and ethics take for granted that there is a basic difference between children and adults. The approaches described in the preceding section as the 'child as object' and the 'child as subject' are, indeed, based on just such an assumption. However, we follow Alderson and Goodey (1996), who question whether research with children necessarily raises unique issues about methods and ethics. We suggest that the understanding of children as social actors and participants is best founded on an *a priori* assumption of what we term 'ethical symmetry' between adults and children. By this we mean that the researcher takes as his or her *starting* point the view that the ethical relationship between researcher and informant is the same whether he or she conducts research with adults or with children. This has a number of implications. The first is that the researcher employs the same ethical principles whether they are researching children or adults. Second, that each right and ethical consideration in relation to adults in the research process has its counterpart for children. Third, the symmetrical treatment of children in research means that any differences between carrying out research with children or with adults should be allowed to arise from this starting point, according to the concrete situation of children, rather than being assumed in advance.

Thus, from this point of view, researchers do not have to use particular methods or, indeed, work with a different set of ethical standards when working with children. Rather it means that the practices employed in the research have to be in line with children's experiences, interests, values and everyday routines. As a researcher one has to be aware of, and in practice

engage with, the local cultures of communication among children paying attention to the social actions of children, their use of language and the meanings they put into words, notions and actions (Christensen, 1999: 76–7). This entails that the researcher establish a dialogue through which it becomes possible to create a better understanding of the social interactions and relations that children are part of (Christensen and James, 2000b).

The term ‘children’ covers a diverse group of people. As in the case of research carried out with adults, the task of working out general ethical values and principles is therefore complex. The obstacles facing childhood researchers working from the perspective of children as social actors are comparable with the problems encountered in social research carried out with other social groups experiencing social exclusion because of their ethnic, gender or social status. The task of the social scientist is to work for the right of people to have a voice and to be heard. In the case of children, ‘age’ is perhaps one of the most dominant factors used to discriminate against children being heard and listened to. In her earlier work Solberg (1996) argued for ignoring ‘age’ as a significant marker in research with children. She writes:

... our concept of such qualities should not influence ways of approaching children in social science research. It should be open to empirical investigation to explore the significance of age and status within different contexts and situations, to explore ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’. (Solberg, 1996: 63–4)

A crucial part of accomplishing this is to enter into what Christensen (1999: 76–7) refers to as local ‘cultures of communication’ (see also above). That this can be successfully done with young children is demonstrated by recent research that developed an imaginative array of methods for listening to them (Clark and Moss, 2001).

In this article, however, we do not advocate the idea that all children are at all times equally suited to be involved in research. Nor should they necessarily be involved as co-researchers (see also Alderson, 1995, 2000). Our intention is, rather, to argue against the age/developmentally based assumptions about children’s competencies and conceptual understanding in research. Instead, researchers need to explore and justify details of children’s participation in research and the decision to involve them in or exclude them from the research process. Critical attention, therefore, needs to be given to variations in children’s social experiences and social competencies by identifying the commonalities and differences between children in the particular contexts we research, and by understanding the way they engage with and respond to the research itself (Christensen and James, 2000a). In this respect the symmetrical approach may be seen as more challenging to researchers than the perhaps much neater traditional models that take the different treatment of children and adults for granted and use ‘age/development’ as prescriptive for children’s involvement and participation in the research. However persuasive such models may appear to be, they are not adequate in

directing the kind of research to be carried out or guiding ways to involve child informants (see also Davis et al., 2000). The researcher working with ethical symmetry has equality as his or her starting point and has, therefore, to consider their actions, responsibilities, use of appropriate methods and ways of communication throughout the research process. Asymmetries as well as symmetries will no longer be held as necessarily stable between different contexts and situations. The premise, rather, is that ethical practice is tied to the active construction of research relationships and cannot be based in presupposed ideas or stereotypes about children or childhood.

However, starting with a symmetrical approach to children in research does not mean ending there. The ethically symmetrical assumption does not have to presume social symmetry in, for example, power relationships between adults and children, or indeed between children themselves. Research relationships always take place within social relations and cultural contexts that fundamentally form the character of the research process and its results. Studies that have explored the asymmetrical treatment of children in society help particularly to throw some important light on these. For example, carrying out studies with children about ethics within medical and social research in England, Alderson (1995) found that the most important obstacles to an ethical treatment of children were not explained by children's limited abilities or lack of understanding of the research. On the contrary, they originated in wider cultural perceptions of children's social positions and in the characteristically hierarchical power relations between children and adults developed during the last century in European and North American societies (Alderson, 1995; Alderson and Goodey, 1996). Another recognition that researchers have to take into account, therefore, is how intergenerational differences between children and adults, as they appear in the specific milieu or context of their research, are constituted. These relationships are not uniform across contexts. This recognition will enable the researcher to understand the, sometimes, implicit power relations between researcher and child informant and be better able to work consciously and in detail with these, both ethically and practically (Mayall, 2000). Taking ethical symmetry as a starting point will, therefore, improve our recognition of how the similarities and differences between conducting research with adults and with children arise according to their context.

That research needs to take into account the influence of cultural perceptions and valuations of children leads to another implication. Children may share many everyday experiences because they are similarly positioned in relation to adults within an intergenerational ordering that places them as subordinate (Alanen, 2001). At the same time, however, children's social experiences will differ because of factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability and social and economic inequalities. To ensure that children's accounts will be understood in the fullest way, researchers need to describe children's perspectives and everyday life accurately. This requires a research practice that

gives a differentiated picture of the lives and social experiences of children drawing out both commonalities and differences between them.

Working with ethical dilemmas: an illustration

In this section we discuss some ethical dilemmas typically encountered in the course of a research project with children. We illustrate this through using a case, an ideal example, composed of a series of events taken from real studies.² The example draws on issues that have arisen while conducting ethnographic work. Although a distinct type, it is one of the most intensive forms of research. The knowledge that is produced in ethnography depends on the researcher taking part in close social interactions with his or her informants over a long period of time. However, precisely because of its intensive and long-term character, ethnographic work provides important insights into the nature of the ethical questions that may also occur in less noticeable ways in other types of research with children (Eder and Corsaro, 1999). We have also chosen to use primary school as the context within which to exemplify these ethical dilemmas. Many European and North American studies of children have taken place within such settings and because of its formal and organizational structure it serves well to demonstrate some general questions in conducting research with children.

Our illustrative study, then, was carried out in a primary school setting. It set out to examine a group of children in their everyday life in the institution, explicitly choosing to view the children as social actors. The study used a range of methods including participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and video recordings of the children and teachers, used in order to make a more precise recall of incidents and interactions possible when the data were later to be worked up in an interpretation.

During the study the researcher considered a range of ethical questions. Even though the study was strongly focused on the children, the researcher was quickly caught up in the different sets of values represented, respectively, by the worlds of adults and of the children in the school. In order to obtain admission to the school, the researcher participated in meetings where she thoroughly discussed the different considerations and requirements of the research demanded by the parents, teachers and local authorities. Through these discussions, she obtained insight into what the adults, as 'gatekeepers' to the institution expected and required of her.

At these meetings a number of issues arose. For example, it was agreed that all interviews with adults would, unless used in research reports, be confidential and would in any case be made anonymous. It was agreed that what the children said would not, except in anonymous research reports, be passed onto the adults. The children were also made this promise. However, already during the early stages of the fieldwork the researcher soon found herself being questioned by the staff about what the children told her

when she was spending time with them on her own. At first this was done gently and very subtly, but as the research work developed it became more direct and obvious. The teachers were intensely interested in the research and what it would say about the well-being of the children in the school. This interest was usually expressed in encouraging and friendly comments but sometimes it would take the form of more persistent questioning about what particular children were saying about their daily lives in the institution. In the staff members' interactions with the researcher they always formally acknowledged the promise of confidentiality but in their everyday encounters some of the teachers would make attempts to reinterpret, modify and undermine it by building a sense of common interest between themselves and the researcher as adult professionals. In this process it was as if a promise of confidentiality to children could be bracketed out, or superseded, by establishing another tacit agreement that it was not to be taken all that seriously.

This placed the researcher in a dilemma. She needed the ongoing cooperation of the staff for the project to take place but she felt that keeping the promise to children was also vital. Not only was it ethically right to keep the promise but also the children had sharpened her awareness of this matter by at first being very careful about what they said to her. During the first few weeks in the school setting some children had tested out the authenticity of her promise of not repeating their words by expressing views or behaving in ways that the teachers might find problematic or would even condemn. They would then wait to see whether the teachers became aware of these in order to see if the researcher was really keeping her promise. Through this the children came to trust the researcher and she came to see that any breach of that trust would have undermined their confidence and jeopardized their continuing participation in the study.

The researcher dealt with the dilemma in a number of ways. She would divert attention from the staff probing, use jokes and light-hearted remarks to avoid the questions, give very general answers and sometimes give little bits of general information that she judged to be of no consequence. At times, though, she felt that the questioning became very persistent and had, on a few occasions, bluntly to remind teachers of the promise given to the children.

These tensions and conflicts of interest became most sharply highlighted in the making of video recordings in the school. The researcher chose this method as a way to produce a set of well-documented data on the everyday interactions and happenings among children that subsequently could enable her to carry out a thorough and detailed analysis. In the initial meetings with the teachers it was made clear to her that the staff disapproved of observations focused directly on their work with the children. Video recording of the teachers was forbidden. However, both parents and teachers allowed the researcher to carry out video recordings of the children. It was

made a condition that the head teacher of the school would be allowed to watch all the recordings made with the children. The researcher was informed that the head would then be able to protect a range of wider concerns they had in relation to the staff, the children's families, the institution and, ultimately, the interests of the local authority.

When meeting the children, the researcher chose to explain to them that she was a 'guest'. She chose this position as she thought it would enable her to demonstrate to the children that she was 'another kind' of adult, different from those usually present in their daily lives. At the same time she felt that she would be able to let the children understand, in a gentle way, that she would only be with them for a limited time before she would leave the primary school again. She did not, however, tell the children what she actually was doing in the school. For example, she did not explain that she was researching children's everyday life and that her particular interest was in how children spend their time together at school. She did not tell them that she was going to write a book about them and about the experience and knowledge she expected to achieve by being with them during their daily life. We might ask why it was not possible to explain what she was doing while being a guest in the school. Would not even the youngest of the children be able to understand that research is 'when you try to find out more about something'? After all, the children would be able to compare this literally with what they themselves were occupied with in many everyday activities at school.

In her work with the children the researcher met a social world dominated by a different set of ethical values compared to those she encountered with the adults. With the children she became part of a context founded in the principle of inclusion. The children willingly invited the researcher to participate in their play, their relationships and their activities, even when these were declared to be 'private' or 'secret'. A crucial question raised by this example is how the researcher might have been able to protect the children's anonymity and confidentiality and reciprocate the trust they have in her and each other. As the early events of the fieldwork demonstrated, the researcher was able to handle fairly successfully the ethical dilemma presented to her by teachers questioning her about what the children told her. These tensions were, however, less successfully handled when it came to making video recordings of children, especially the ethics of showing recordings of children's play and interactions with each other to the professional adults – who themselves had declined to be so recorded. This ethical question became sharpest in relation to recordings that the researcher made of children's 'secret meetings' and 'private' activities to which the researcher gained admission as an observer and, in the children's understanding, as a 'trusted guest'. Through this research practice, the researcher paradoxically gave up treating children as social actors by undermining their ability to protect their own interests. In addition she exceeded a probably widely accepted

convention that a guest usually does not make video recordings in private settings with the purpose of showing them in a professional one.

The researcher, who acknowledged the dominant position of adults in relation to children, legitimized her practice by arguing that children have to rely on the expectation that the adults who care for them will guard their interests. However, given the opportunity the children may well have refused the researcher the opportunity to make video recordings of certain situations and events if they, for example, had known how the recordings would be used, who would be seeing them and for what purpose. Had they been informed, the children would have been able to decide for themselves when the researcher was and was not allowed to make recordings of their activities. In this case, however, the researcher chose to rely on parents and staff whom she trusted to protect the children and look after their interests during the research process. Unfortunately, this meant that no one perceived as problematic the fact that the video recordings were shown to others without this being agreed by the children.

How could we imagine the researcher taking on responsibility in this situation to balance the competing interests: protecting the interests of the children and attending to her own concerns as researcher; between the interests of the children and those of the parents and teachers? In this situation the researcher's wish to gain access to making video recordings of the children while also fulfilling the requirements of the teachers not to be recorded, and making a promise to guard their professional concerns, committed her also to deliver research material back to her adult informants. These goals, however, compromised any claims the children may have wanted to make on the protection of their secrets and their private lives.

Working with ethical symmetry: tactics and strategy

In our illustrative case the researcher carefully considered a range of ethical questions throughout the research process. However, while the solutions found seem particularly inadequate when judged against the researcher's perspective on children as social actors, the practices involved are far from unique. On the contrary, they are still common within some psychological, medical and educational research (see, for example, Woodhead and Faulkner [2000] for a discussion of this question). The illustration shows that it is comparatively easy to carry them over into research that, in other respects, shifts the perspective to see children as social actors.

The ethical issues raised by the social actor (and even more so the co-researcher) perspective are not confined to negotiating access and permission but form an important part of the ongoing, everyday process of the research. They may arise before, during and after a research project is completed. As our illustration shows, the settings of research are often complex ones and they can generate many different, intersecting and conflicting inter-

ests. An important question therefore is the need for researchers to consider ways to enable children to protect their own interests through the research. We would argue that the researcher in our illustration actually could not avoid taking on the responsibility of protecting children's interests. This responsibility does not disappear even when the researcher is faced with the power of participating adults to influence and sometimes control the conditions under which the research may take place. On the contrary, the existence of such conflicts means that symmetrical consideration of children's interests be maintained at all stages of the work. This in turn means engaging with children in a dialogue right through the research process.

In part this necessity arises from the fact that the surveillance of children has long been a part of their everyday social reality (Bernstein, 1977), although in recent years it may have been intensifying (Prout, 2000). Perhaps we have become so accustomed to its various forms, and research so entangled with it, that we are unaware of its more hidden aspects. Awareness of the effects of research on children must alert us to when we may need to refrain from using a certain methodology or carry out the research in a particular setting. For example, in this case example we could suggest various possibilities that might have been better suited when conducting social research with children. When faced with the problem of having to show the video recordings for the head of the school without having obtained the children's consent or them knowing about it, the researcher could have chosen a number of different courses of action. Each of these flows from the principle of ethical symmetry and working through its meaning in the given research situation.

Most obviously, the researcher could have informed the children and asked for their permission – thus giving them a choice. In particular situations, for example the activities the children called 'secret meetings' or 'private', the researcher could have decided not to record these on video, or she could have once again reminded the children that they might be seen by teachers or others. Another possibility would have been choosing not to use video recordings at all in this particular local setting and instead to employ another method (such as, for example, observational notes). This method would have better allowed the researcher to keep control of the data produced throughout the research process and secure confidentiality and anonymity to the children before presenting the data to others. Finally, the researcher might have decided to carry out the research in another institution where the head or other adults would not have wished to insist on full access to the video recordings.

Any researcher may face a set of difficult, even insoluble, research dilemmas. However, the limited scope of many ethical discussions also means that researchers often have to rely largely on their own personal judgements in their everyday ethical practice. This will, of course, sometimes lead to an inadequate treatment of ethical issues. Rather than individ-

1. The purpose of the research

If the research findings are meant to benefit certain children, who are they, and how might they benefit?

2. Costs and hoped-for benefits

Might there be risks or costs such as time, inconvenience, embarrassment, intrusion of privacy, sense of failure or coercion, fear of admitting anxiety?

3. Privacy and confidentiality

When significant extracts from interviews are quoted in reports, should researchers first check the quotation and commentary with the child (or parent) concerned?

4. Selection, inclusion and exclusion

Have some children been excluded because, for instance, they have speech or learning difficulties? Can the exclusion be justified?

5. Funding

Should the research funds be raised only from agencies which avoid activities that can harm children?

6. Review and revision of the research aims and methods

Have children or their carers helped to plan or commented on the research?

7. Information for children, parents and other carers

Are the children and adults concerned given details about the purpose and nature of the research, the methods and timing, and the possible benefits, harms and outcomes?

8. Consent

Do children know that if they refuse or withdraw from research, this will not be held against them in any way? How do the researchers help children know these things?

9. Dissemination

Will the children and adults involved be sent short reports of the main findings?

10. Impact on children

Besides the effects of the research on the children involved, how might the conclusions affect larger groups of children?

Figure 1 Summary of key questions in research with children

ual blame, this situation calls for a greater collective understanding about the way we, as researchers, handle and make ethical decisions. Our contention is that a more serious ethical discussion is required if we are collectively to find our way through such situations.

In this respect the codification of research practices with children has a definite value, in that it can document a wide range of issues in a systematic way and make them collectively available. We are all indebted to Alderson (1995) for suggesting some key topics to consider when doing research with children. This is especially useful given the scant attention devoted specifically to children in existing codes of research (Lindsay, 2000). Roberts (2000) has made a useful summary of Alderson's 10 points (see Figure 1).

However, by posing a series of questions, rather than setting out a set of prescribed practices, Alderson and Roberts constitute a responsibility on the part of the researcher to examine the particularities of the research they propose to carry out. They do not legislate for ethical practice by giving prescriptions that are supposed to apply across all situations but they do suggest some of the issues that researchers should consider.³

Implicit in their approach is the assumption that codes of conduct, guidelines, sets of rules and so on are of only limited value. This is in line with Lindsay (2000: 18) who argues: 'Research on ethical dilemmas has indicated that practice cannot be made to fit written codes, however well they are devised. There may be two or more factors, which have different, even conflicting implications.'

Rules are in their very nature poor at dealing with new, unforeseen situations, they can be inflexible, too easily become a routine, and at worst they act as a fig leaf for the instrumental determination to get the research done at any cost. In short, they can become a substitute for the active engagement of individual researchers and the social science community as a whole with ethical issues.

According to Lindsay (2000), most codes of research ethics place an often disproportionate emphasis on only certain features of the research process. These are: how the researcher gains access to their field, recruits his or her informants and obtains their consent to participate in the study, and how to handle various questions about anonymity and confidentiality. While this has promoted the importance of researchers keeping these more formal requirements in order, it has also contributed to a focus on particular ethical moments in research rather than ethics as an ongoing social practice. Much less attention has, therefore, been paid to broader aspects of the research process. These include children's involvement and participation in the research process and its design, the interpretation of data, the later dissemination of results and consideration of the potential benefits and other effects on children (but see Alderson, 1995, 2000).

Furthermore, the ethical problems discussed in our illustrative example show how fieldwork is likely to bring researchers into contact with different

locally constituted ethics. As researchers, we work in social settings with their own local ethical practice. There may be several conflicting practices existing within each setting. In our example this was illustrated by an 'adult world' that particularly emphasized the principles of selection and exclusion through a range of formal (and informal) criteria and the 'children's world' whose ethical practice was based on the principle of inclusion. It is this meeting of diverse ethical practices that the researcher has to handle and research ethics will always have to work inside and be integrated into already existing ethical frames.

Davis (1998) supports this notion by showing the need for researchers to work reflexively at ethical questions in the ethnography of childhood. Davis writes:

Ethical guidelines may only have meaning during the actual process of the researcher/child interaction . . . ethical considerations depend on the researchers ability to understand and respond to the feelings of the children they work with. This, in itself, is a problem of cultural exchange/interpretation which is relative to different individuals or groups of children who participate in a study. (Davis, 1998: 329)

He argues that only continual reflection by the researcher on their fieldwork experiences can lead to an understanding of the diversity of children's views and lives. Eder and Corsaro (1999) also support this view suggesting that ethnography, because it can create a sustained engagement with children's lives that is both detailed and contextualized, allows the researcher to 'better address ethical dilemmas as they arise' according to the needs of the situation (Eder and Corsaro, 1999: 528).

However, while agreeing with the vital place of reflexivity into research practice, we feel that reliance on the individual researcher alone is problematic. It rests on the experience and skill of the individual researcher and may lead to an overreliance on developing ethical practices that are personal and idiosyncratic. Flexibility and sensitivity to children's interests by the individual researcher is necessary but, in itself, it does not provide, or help to develop, a collectively available set of ethical values. It does not recognize clearly enough the need for childhood researchers to debate and develop a shared ethical ground on which their work stands.

Another way of thinking about this is, we suggest, to make a distinction between ethical 'tactics' and ethical 'strategy' in research. It is a condition of research that the researcher has to think about ethics and their practical meaning in the specific circumstances of their work. This requires a vigilance, openness and flexibility that not only responds to particular circumstances but requires almost daily renewal. Our proposal for a serious professional debate of the ethical questions in research with children can, however, be seen as a critique of an ethical practice that builds solely on such a tactical approach. The relatively pragmatic steering of ethical research practice is not enough. Such a practical, situation-oriented ethics

has also to be rooted in a value-oriented strategy that anchors particular tactics in a broader set of aims. The principle of ethical symmetry is one such strategic orientation: the rights, feelings and interests of children should be given as much consideration as those of adults. A focus on clarifying conduct in research with children from such a strategic perspective will provide researchers with a much better base for judging unforeseen questions and ethical dilemmas. As a research community, therefore, there is a need to work within and contribute to the development of such general values and strategic aspects of research with children.

In this respect, the guidelines proposed by Alderson and summarized by Roberts have the merit of being based on generally accepted frameworks in professional ethics (Alderson, 1995: 49–57). These are: convictions about duty (justice, respect for autonomy and that research must not do harm); rights (to non-interference); and questions about harm/benefit (the researcher must ensure that his or her research does no harm and must work for the research to be beneficial). These guidelines about research with children, then, are based on broader questions about the human rights of research subjects (and in this sense are symmetrical about children and adults).

Furthermore, such commonalities with general human rights are found in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 says that not only do children have the right to express their opinion about matters that concern them, they also have the right to be heard. Article 13 declares that children have the right to seek, receive and get information and ideas of every kind. In this way, the CRC provides that in all work (including research) children are treated as fellow human beings, giving their views autonomous status and including consideration of their rights. It is no longer sufficient or legitimate, therefore, to say that children are ‘too little or too young’ to understand and to have a say in decisions concerning themselves. When participating in research children need to be informed in such a way so that they understand their own right to decide whether they wish to take a part and they are enabled to make independent choices and contribute to the research design throughout the research process.

At the same time, however, a research practice based in a set of ethical values requires the active consideration of children as fellow human beings and a continual sensitivity to their own emotions, interests and considerations in the varied situations of their lives. This must be explored and worked out in the concrete circumstances of the research setting. It is important, as demonstrated earlier, to engage with the actual conflicts of interests in research. We need to attend to how children’s interests are judged by others and how, in real situations, children’s interests may be in conflict with, for example, those of parents, professional adults, politicians or researchers.

Social life, including social research, is uncertain, variable, context-bound and complex. Researchers need to engage with ethical questions through a reflexive research practice. However, a collective dialogue about

how we develop and apply general values and principles to specific situations is also necessary. At the current time, such general values or strategic base of research are, we suggest, best thought of as the emergent outcome of a broad, ongoing discussion and exchange between researchers. Such a dialogue would benefit from having a formalized presence in our professional practice. For example, it needs to be a convention that ethical issues are addressed as an expected part of the theoretical, methodological and empirical reporting of research. Another very useful way would be to follow the example of the American Anthropological Association, whose newsletter provides a forum for professional discussion of actual ethical dilemmas encountered by its members during their fieldwork and possible solutions to them (Cassell and Jacobs, 2000). These discussions have also been made available on the Internet (www.ameranthassn.org), a development that suggests the potential for net-based exchanges between researchers on ethical issues. Children could also have access to such discussions and express their views about how research should be conducted. Such concrete dialogue about the ethical dimensions of social research with children would allow for the movement between individual experience and practice and the generation of collective strategies. In an important sense this is a question of professional standards, in that we have a collective responsibility for the promotion of discussion, training and support of researchers in the childhood field.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that there are ethical implications of seeing children as social actors and, more recently, as participants or co-researchers. Once children are recognized as actors then a new layer of complexity is created, through which potential new clashes of interest and ethical dilemmas become recognizable. As the range of empirical studies viewing children as social actors is extended, so a multitude of theoretical, practical, moral and ethical challenges are being encountered. These vary between different settings, reflect the engagement of researchers with local ethical practice and extend across the whole research process rather than being bound to particular stages or moments of it.

In order to meet the challenges presented by this we have argued that two kinds of complementary dialogue are needed. The first is an intensified and broadened discussion of ethical questions among the community of social science researchers of childhood. This should draw on the experience that researchers gain in meeting ethical dilemmas, according to the particular circumstances they encounter, using them to develop a set of strategic value orientations for conducting ethical child research.

For this purpose, researchers' encounters with ethical dilemmas, and their ways of confronting them, need to be documented, reported and dis-

cussed so that they can inform the continued development of such an ethical framework. This debate could help to identify strategic elements of ethical practice on which to build future research. In this article we have not attempted to catalogue all such dilemmas or to provide a comprehensive list of strategic ethical aims. However, we have argued that the notion of an ethical symmetry between adults and children and a critical appreciation of children's social position are both vital elements of the picture.

The current debate approaches ethical questions from two directions. One sees the solution in regulations and codes of research ethics, or more modestly in the formulation of ethical guidelines. The other direction places primary emphasis on the individual responsibility and personal skills of the researcher through developing a constant sensitive and reflexive approach in his or her own practice. In this article we have argued that both of these approaches are needed. Each, however, is inadequate on its own and they need to be brought together in a collective debate among researchers within the social study of childhood. The aim should be to develop a set of strategic ethical values that can give researchers the flexibility to meet the very varied circumstances of research that they may encounter while also providing an anchor for their practice.

The second dialogue is between researchers and the children who take part in research. This would not only help to sharpen researchers' knowledge and internal professional discussions but also treat the increasing involvement of children in research with the respect that it deserves. Key to this is the challenge of taking responsibility for children in the sense suggested by Bauman in the opening section of this article. Such a stance means entering a dialogue that recognizes both intra- and intergenerational commonality but also honours difference. It is difficult to imagine a contemporary ethical practice of social science research with children that does not place this at its centre. Indeed, as Rorty (1992) suggests, in a world disillusioned by the promise of any universal and rational solutions, it is only through dialogue that we can regain some sense of progress, however slow and incremental it might be.

Notes

1. In this article we refer to research with children in sometimes rather broad general terms. We find this appropriate for the general intention of this article, which is to encourage and stimulate the development of ethical practice within the research community at large. However, we are also well aware that particular fields of childhood research such as education or medicine have to deal with specific issues and dilemmas that need particular considerations and decisions that this article does not attempt to cover.

2. As the events described in the case example do not derive only from our own work we have chosen to secure the anonymity of the researchers involved. The purpose of this article is not to criticize any particular researchers, rather we wish their experiences to illustrate some of the dilemmas that in our experience are commonly encountered by researchers in the field. We

hope this will encourage a broad collective dialogue and involvement in dealing with ethical dilemmas encountered by researchers in the social study of childhood, and that the case example illustrates the very thin line that there sometimes is between the right and the wrong conduct.

3. This is also concordant with notions of professionalism, in which guidelines rather than prescriptive rules allow some interpretive autonomy to the practitioner.

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