

CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN – METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES¹

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the methodological and ethical challenges of conducting qualitative research – especially individual interviews – with children in relation to an investigation of individual perspectives about the time that parents and their teenage children spend together. From an overview of the topic, three key issues are identified: power inequalities, competence, and parental gatekeeping. First, the paper discusses general challenges and suggests possible responses as far as conducting qualitative interviews with children are concerned, with a focus on the phases of research design and data collection. Second, it reflects on specific questions that are raised in connection with an investigation of the sensitive issues of parental time and technology use. The paper concludes that using a combination of traditional and innovative techniques, and paying attention to taking a reflexive approach throughout the research process, are essential elements of research with children.*

KEYWORDS: *research with children and young people, qualitative interview, methodology, ethics*

¹ This paper was written as part of a National Research, Development and Innovation Fund project ('Race against time', OTKA K120086). An earlier Hungarian-language version of this article appeared in *Prosperitas*. The author is grateful to Gábor Király for his helpful comments.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses some important methodological and ethical dilemmas related to qualitative sociological investigations that focus on children. It outlines some possible responses and suggestions regarding these issues based on earlier empirical findings. The paper focuses primarily on qualitative interviews, and especially the phase of data collection: some key issues are determined, and the researcher's considerations are elaborated. This discussion of methodological and ethical frameworks was instigated by research that focused on examining the time that parents and their children spend together. However, the paper is primarily written to reflect the universal challenges of undertaking qualitative research with children.

In the previous decades, research that has sought to capture the child's perspective has become a topic of interest of international social studies (Christensen – James 2000; Greene – Hogan 2005). The practice of defining childhood as a social product has become popular in sociological debate, also leading to the interpretation of children as a social group (Christensen – Prout 2005; Mayall 2000). Consequently, the 'missing voice' of children is interpreted in relation to their disadvantageous position and their dependence and subordination to adults (Christensen – Prout 2005). Therefore, understanding the child's perspective is crucial for integrating the opinion of this neglected social group into the sociological debate. Furthermore, the diverse conceptualizations of childhood reflect methodological and ethical dilemmas and ways of conducting research with children (Punch 2002a).

Although qualitative investigations can reveal some important and still unexplored aspects of family functioning, family research mainly neglects this type of approach (LaRossa – Wolf 1985). Moreover, studies that investigate family dynamics primarily focus on parents, neglecting the perspectives of the child (Milkie et al. 2010; Kremer-Sadlik – Paugh 2007; Christensen 2002).

There are no widely accepted practices for conducting interviews with children in the field of sociology in Hungary, and examples of qualitative family research with children are lacking. Thus, to the author's best knowledge there has been no review of methodological and ethical issues related to research with children in Hungary. The current paper is designed to outline the challenges researchers may face, and provide them with guidance. First, the paper describes the processes which have led to the emergence of research into childhood. Methodological difficulties are then discussed. Some potential ethical and methodological recommendations are presented through a definition of some key fields. Finally, the paper summarizes the implications for the above-mentioned research and offers some universal suggestions about interviewing children.

WHY AND HOW HAS IT BECOME IMPORTANT TO EXPLORE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES?

The sociology of childhood

The more intense exploration of children's perspectives and the spread of research with children was instigated by two changes. First, a shift in the conceptualization of childhood (Qvotrup 1993; Brannen – O'Brien 1995; Christensen – Prout 2005) that also significantly influences how research is conducted (Punch 2002a). Second, the acknowledgement of children's rights, and especially an emphasis on their participatory rights (Morrow – Richards 1996).

Although there is a long tradition of research involving children³, these studies tend to neglect children's voices and opinions, and thus lack the actual *involvement* of children in research (Hill 1997; Morrow – Richards 1996; Brannen – O'Brien 1995). Two theoretical approaches which have influenced this tradition may be mentioned; namely, socialization theory, and developmental psychology (Kirk 2007).

These approaches are based on the differentiation between adults and children, and define childhood as a developmental period, a phase of growing up. Consequently, children are regarded as immature, irrational, and asocial entities who are shaped as social beings through the socialization process (Christensen – Prout 2005).

Social constructionism has questioned the conceptualization of childhood as a biological phenomenon. According to this approach, childhood is also a social and cultural product, and children may be defined as active, competent persons (Christensen – Prout 2005: 48).

Besides changes in the conceptual framework, the acknowledgement of children's rights, which also has fostered the involvement of children in research, must be underlined (Morrow – Richards 1996; Hanafin et al. 2014; Hill 2006). In 1991, Hungary also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989). This contains some important articles that highlight the participatory right of children to express their opinions freely and to decide about issues that concern them⁴.

3 Certain fields of sociology focus on children, such as family sociology, gender studies, health and education research (Brannen – O'Brien 1995: 1).

4 Article 12 (1) and Article 13 (1) (UN 1989)

Christensen and Prout (2004) differentiate between four approaches to childhood research based on diverse theoretical paradigms. In the first, children appear as the objects of research, an approach based on the emphasis of their dependent position and vulnerability. Investigations that deal with information about children that is collected from adults – parents, teachers etc. – are good examples of this. The second approach regards children as equal social actors and, consequently, as the subjects of research. However, significant emphasis is placed on the disparities between children and adults, and on judging children's cognitive and social skills when including them in research. The third approach does not differentiate between adults and children; it acknowledges children as real social actors, not only as parts of families and other institutions (Christensen – Prout 2002). The fourth approach defines children as active participants, capable of participating in research design, based on the international declaration of children's participatory rights (Christensen – Prout 2002). Consequently, participatory research methods, such as participatory action research, have spread in research with children (Hill 1997; Punch 2002a).

To summarize these changes, from the 1990s onwards the emerging sociology of childhood has criticized approaches based on the division between adults and children that regards childhood as an object of research according to different levels of cognitive development of children. Consequently, the paradigm that defines children as research subjects, and accordingly involves children at diverse levels and in diverse ways in research has begun to prevail.

Research fields

The processes described above have led to an increase in the sociological interest in children, and (mainly) ethnographic and qualitative investigations have increased in number. The importance of research with children in fields related to health may be highlighted (e.g. the investigation of children's experiences in hospital with chronic diseases and self-care) (Christensen – Prout 2005), since health research approached related ethical problems earlier, and in more detail (Hill 2005). The other relevant field is education research, where research into school life and school performance may be underlined. Furthermore, the issue of identity – ethnic and gender – has also emerged in research with children (Christensen – Prout 2005). Despite the significant role of children in families, family sociology has not researched the experiences of children in families (Morrow – Richards 1996). In this respect, Ellen Galinsky's (1999) representative examination in the 1990s in the US was a pioneering

project that also examined children's perspectives about the relationship between family and work life. Furthermore, from the early 2000s onwards other research explored the perspective of the child concerning family functioning (e.g. Jensen – McKee 2003; Hedegaard 2012).

The Hungarian context

In Hungary only a few sociological research projects with children can be identified, especially concerning qualitative investigations. Primarily, assessments related to international research, (for example, PISA tests in the field of education research [Balázs et al. 2013]), or research focusing on children's health and lifestyles in collaboration with the World Health Organisation may be mentioned (Németh – Költő 2010). Although children are also included in the target group of the 'Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás' (*Hungarian Youth Research*) (Székely 2013a), most of the respondents are adults (the target group is respondents of 15-29 years of age). Furthermore, the above-mentioned investigations are based on quantitative data collection and do not deal with the methodological and ethical dilemmas of surveying children.

Investigations of the use of electronic media by children have spread, although these typically use focus groups and do not discuss the potentially special procedures required for undertaking research with children (László 2005; Székely 2013b). As far as the discussion of these methodological dilemmas is concerned, a focus group inquiry among children in school undertaken by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Center for Social Sciences "Lendület" RECONS research group is investigating this issue (Bocskor – Szilasi 2015).

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Scholars' perceptions about childhood and society's idea of children determines how research with the latter is conducted. The theoretical paradigm adopted by the researcher significantly influences whether similarities or differences between adults and children are emphasized. Consequently, elaboration of these similarities and differences is the focus of methodological and ethical literature (Christensen – Prout 2002; Morrow – Richards 1996; Punch 2002a; Hill 2005). The scholar's perspective about this issue affects all of the research processes (Punch 2002a).

In line with the approaches outlined by Christensen and Prout (2002), we regard children as competent persons and equal actors, and thereby as the subjects of research. Notwithstanding this, their differences from adults may be considered significant, and thereby shape our methodological framework. In following this theoretical approach, research with children may not be conducted in the same manner as with adults (Gibson 2012), and it is highly important that basic differences are taken into account by planning for research with children (Hill 2005). This standpoint also influences the challenges described in the following section of this paper.

Hill (2005) distinguishes three main differences between adults and children: discrepancy in verbal competence, unequal power relationships, and the additional vulnerability of children. Concerning verbal competence, age-related disparities are undeniable (in terms of vocabulary and – apart from verbal skills – in understanding and maintaining attention). The unequal power relation between adults and children is based on the existence of an adult-centered society that means that children are under control of adults (Punch 2002a). The deconstruction of their marginal position and related power inequalities is the most central issue in research with children. Moreover, this is closely related to the issue that children are more vulnerable and are more exposed to persuasion and manipulation (Hill 2005).

Regarding similarities, there are no major disparities in memory and recollection between adults and children (Hill 2005). Moreover, the investigation of subjective feelings and thoughts – typically the interest of qualitative family research – does not require accuracy of recall (Gibson 2012). Furthermore, children have the same rights concerning what information about the research is shared (Hill 2005). Consequently, differences between adults and children do not mean that children are less reliable research subjects (Greene – Hill 2005).

Research ethics

In the debate surrounding research with children, ethical considerations are typically more emphasized than methodological ones (Punch 2002a). In the following section, the important issues of research ethics will be briefly elaborated.

Two dimensions of research ethics can be distinguished (Guillemin – Gillam 2004; Mazzone – Harcourt 2014). The first one concerns the formal procedures that are called ‘procedural ethics’ by Guillemin and Gillam (2004:

263). This includes adhering to the content of codes of ethics and the approvals and permissions of ethics committees that ensure that the methodology and the implementation of the proposed research meet the ethical requirements of the specific field of science (Mazzoni – Harcourt 2014). The issue of research consent is one of the central topics in the ethical regulation of research with children (Morrow – Richards 1996). The Hungarian Sociological Association's Code of Ethics (2001) does not specifically deal with issues related to conducting research with children. Based on the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics (2008) and examples of other Hungarian scientific communities of practice – such as psychology, and market research (Hungarian Psychological Association 2004; ICC/ESOMAR 2009) – it can be concluded that researchers should obtain consent both from children and parents when involving children in research (the issue of informed consent is discussed subsequently).

The other dimension of ethics is its practical application in the field of research. This concerns everyday ethical dilemmas which are not predictable, and which compel the researcher to make decisions at any stage of the research. The authors call these situations 'ethically important moments', or 'micro-ethics' (Guillemim – Gallim 2004: 265). These may involve situations when participants feel uncomfortable during research, or when the researcher has to decide whether they can discuss a sensitive topic. Phelan and Kisella (2013: 84) describe some research situations that exemplify these moments: because of a child's nonverbal cues, the researcher feels that the atmosphere has become tense and more uncomfortable, accordingly, the participant avoids eye contact, becomes quieter and stares at the floor. The researcher does not ask any more questions about the topic, and lets the child lead the interview. In the end, the decision results in important and until-then unexplored information.

Consequently, obtaining formal approval is not enough for managing unpredictable situations. The researcher's personal responsibility is also crucial because they decide directly in the field about ethical concerns (Mazzoni – Harcourt 2014). A combination of the two approaches (formal procedures and ethics in practice) and the continuous reflexivity of the researcher are required if research is to be carried out in an ethical manner (Christensen – Prout 2002). The notion of reflexivity is essential: Guillemim and Gillam (2004) extend its application to ethical practices when they suggest that "Adopting a reflexive research process means a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just in relation to the research methods and the data, but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context" (p. 275). Therefore, this issues is of notable significance in research with children (Christensen – Prout

2002; Punch 2002a). Some practices of reflexivity will be discussed among the recommendations that follow.⁵

In conclusion, despite the ways in which children are distinguished from adults, no guidelines are available about conducting research with this group (Gibson 2012). This paper was thus written to provide some suggestions and identify some of the dilemmas related to key areas. In the literature about research with children, ethical and methodological concerns are largely mixed. Thus, these concerns will not be elaborated separately, but the paper instead focuses on the three sources of adult-child differentiation mentioned previously: power inequality, competence, and parental gatekeeping. (The latter relates to the vulnerability of children, since contacting children is possible only through adults.) In the following, various difficulties – methodological and ethical – associated with these three key issues are discussed, and possible responses are described.

Power inequality

Dilemmas

The researcher's position of power and status with regard to children primarily raises ethical concerns; furthermore, the interpretation of research findings is responsible for most of the difficulties (Punch 2002a; Hanafin et al. 2014). Nevertheless, power inequalities may also be taken into consideration during the phases of research design and data collection. First of all, this might influence the participation of children. Gatekeepers can decide whether to allow researchers to approach children, raising ethical issues and also decreasing the reliability of data. The problems of gatekeeping are elaborated below.

Furthermore, fundamental inequalities exist between the power of the researcher and research participants. For this reason, the issue of social desirability can arise: participants may try to impress the researcher by providing answers which they believe will be viewed positively. This can influence the data significantly. In the case of research with children, a further power dimension – the power differential between adults and children – can strengthen these effects (Punch 2002a).

⁵ Provision of a detailed discussion about the practices of reflexivity is beyond the scope of this paper. For examples of the elaboration of the concept, and guidelines about how to practice reflexivity, see e.g. Warin 2011, or Phelan – Kinsella 2013.

Furthermore, the research method can affect power inequality. Traditional methods – such as qualitative interviews – are especially liable to increase the inequality that exists between researcher and research participant. Children might not tell the truth for many reasons: for example, to avoid embarrassing or painful conversations, or because of a feeling of shame. Face-to-face interviews can thus be especially problematic, since children are often asked to respond to notably personal questions – concerning, for example, their relationship with parents or their personal satisfaction – to a strange adult, in a situation in many ways similar to an exam (Punch 2002a).

Moreover, the research setting may also enhance unequal power relations. The majority of research projects with children occur in institutions such as schools or medical institutions where children have less control (Punch 2002a). Consequently, the research setting may affect the findings. Despite this observation, earlier empirical experience indicates conflicting results from interviewing at home. On the one hand, the home environment supports informality and greater autonomy (Mayall 2000), but on the other, children may consider personal questions and questions about domestic relations to be intrusive in the home environment (Hill 2006). The problem of the researcher's role also arises with interviewing at home, since the former are guests in the household (Mayall 2000, Jordan 2006).

Suggestions

In line with the above-elaborated dilemmas related to power inequalities, two issues which might enhance the empowerment of children may be highlighted: ensuring free choice of participation and of research conditions, and selection of the appropriate research method.

First, obtaining informed consent can provide children with the right to decide about their participation. Moreover, guaranteeing children's free choice to participate can help the interviewer establish good relations through enhancing comfort and building trust. Maintaining a positive and confidential relationship between researcher and child is indispensable, and may also increase the reliability and validity of data that is gathered (Punch 2002a).

There is an additional and important function of obtaining informed consent: the process informs participants about the details of the research (i.e. goals, what is expected from the participants, how long it will take, and how the data will be used and disseminated). Sharing such information contributes to trust-building (Hill 2005).

If the child is not able to give consent, they must be informed verbally about the research (the researcher making sure that they comprehend the process) and they should freely agree to participate (Hanafin et al. 2014). Obtaining consent from a child might require specific forms of preparation, the description of which goes beyond the scope of this article. Gibson (2012) outlines some strategies that researchers can use to facilitate the understanding of consent. There is evidence in the literature on research methodology that teenagers are able to give informed consent, and that children of over seven years old can meaningfully give their assent to participating in research. However, parental consent is necessary in each case (Hanafin et al. 2014).

Concerning practices of reflexivity, informed consent should also be construed in a reflexive manner as a process rather than as a one-off event. In clarifying the role of the children involved in the research process, the researcher should inform children that they may withdraw from the study at any time, or not answer uncomfortable questions (Hill 2005; Warin 2011; Gibson 2012). Furthermore, revisiting the child's assent throughout the research process by observing their verbal and nonverbal cues and offering them the chance to withdraw consent may improve reflexivity (Phelan – Kinsella 2013).

Furthermore, children are empowered if they can decide about the conditions of the research. Concerning the interview technique, participants may have more freedom than in the case of other qualitative methods such as focus groups or participant observation. Being given free choice of location and time of interview might increase confidence in the researcher (Greene – Hill 2005). Similarly, Gibson (2012) suggests that the researcher engage in activities with children to promote enjoyment of the process and create a partnership that builds trust and thereby decreases the power differential. This is crucial mainly in adult-dominated places where children have even less control (Punch 2002a). Connected to this, it might be especially beneficial to interview children in their own spaces, where they feel comfortable and safe. Concerning the researcher's role in the home of the family under investigation, it is important that this is clarified, and that boundaries are established in advance. The researcher must adapt to the hosts' – thus, the child's – needs (Mayall 2000). Moreover, Jordan (2006) proposes that families may define the researcher's role differently, and the interviewer should acknowledge that these roles shape the home environment. In relation to this, researchers should continuously question the child's perception of their role, and reflect on this in order to empower participants (Phelan – Kinsella 2013).

In connection with the interviewer's role, gender is highly important, a fact which should be taken into account in the research design. For example, Gibson (2012: 151) suggests that young women can establish rapport with children more easily because they do not seem threatening.

Second, using the appropriate research method can also mitigate inequality. Many researchers (Punch 2002b; Greene – Hill 2005) consider the application of task-based innovative methods – for example, written methods (such as drawing, or the diary method) or the application of visual techniques (picture-taking by children) – to be effective techniques. Punch (2002a; 2002b) argues that these methods may decrease unequal power relations, because in these situations children do not have to immediately furnish ‘proper’ answers, meaning that they can think over the subject of the research. One piece of research in Scotland with children aged 13-14 applied the innovative “secret box” technique: participants responded to sensitive questions in written form by placing answers in a closed box (Punch 2002b).

Moreover, Warin (2012) argues that the application of these participatory methods promotes reflexivity, thereby fostering rapport and creating a more positive research experience.

In sum, power inequalities may influence the child’s freedom of choice to participate, and data may be less reliable because children seek to impress the researcher, primarily in one-to-one situations (Punch 2002a). Accordingly, the distance between researcher and participants should be reduced in order to obtain valid and reliable data. Obtaining consent, providing a free choice of research conditions, and applying appropriate methods are effective solutions.

Competence

Dilemmas

What follows is a discussion of a critical subject: the competence of children. The different approaches to the interpretation of childhood determine whether children are considered competent to be involved in an investigation as research subjects, and in some cases also to be actively involved in research design. The researchers’ standpoint regarding their competence can influence which age group will be chosen as the target group of the research, and which research technique is considered to be suitable.

Concerning the competence of children, we find age-based distinctions to be crucial. Most research projects based on the developmental perspective seek to identify an age group which is considered to be competent enough to provide usable data (Hill 1997). However, many researchers argue that age-based differentiation must be viewed critically. Accordingly, although disparities in understanding and in communicative competence must play a central role, age

should not be identified with level of development (Greene – Hill 2005; Gibson 2012). On the one hand, the latter approach conceals in-group diversity (Greene – Hill 2005), while differences in gender and social and ethnic background also influence methodological considerations. On the other hand, models of the development of children are socially and culturally determined (Punch 2002a: 324). However, the importance of age in society cannot be disputed, since it is a component of how children's life paths are defined. Children's progress at institutions (for example, the educational system) suggests that children of similar ages have similar experiences (Greene – Hill 2005).

Connected to this observation, the researcher may face the challenge of engaging children in developmentally appropriate research. Here, the choice of applicable methods and questions that are suited to the child's developmental abilities and to their understanding and communication competences are important factors (Gibson 2012).

Suggestions

Despite the critiques of age-based differentiation, most researchers suggest that cognitive developmental level related to age is an important dimension that researchers should be aware of (Mauthner 1997; Gibson 2012). Gibson (2012:151) proposes that “there is general agreement that by age 7, most children have the skills necessary to provide accurate and useful information when interviewers employ methods that are developmentally appropriate”. In line with this, Mauthner (1997) considers individual interview technique and the application of self-reporting instruments appropriate for investigating older children.

Moreover, the selection of children according to age is also highly relevant in terms of constructing focus groups. It is recommended that children should be no more than two years apart in age to avoid the influence of peer pressure, or the tendency for older children to influence or dominate younger fellows (Gibson 2012: 152). However, the existence of diversity in skill and competence among children in the same age group is undeniable. In conclusion, a balance should be found that avoids the bias that the researcher's preconceptions about a certain age group overly defines their approach (Kirk 2007: 1256).

The choice of the appropriate research technique results not only in the empowerment of children, but also contributes to information being obtained from children with methods suited to their skills and preferences (Punch 2002b).

In the case of combining interviews with innovative techniques, the popularity of the ‘child-friendly’ method has increased. Some scholars argue that emphasizing the ‘child-friendly’ nature of techniques runs contrary to the

conception of the new sociology of childhood because it underlines the claim to children's immaturity and incompetence (Punch 2002a). Moreover, these methods may also be useful for investigating adults. As a result, Punch (2002a) argues against the use of this term. This position is also confirmed by children's opinions about diverse interview strategies: an earlier piece of research found that children did not prefer task-based methods to traditional interviews (Punch 2002b). The diversity of children is reflected in their research preferences, which can also define the choice of method(s) (Greene – Hill 2005). Using a variety of methods might be an effective strategy for grasping the diversity of childhood and exploring children's diverse perspectives (Hill 2006). Interviews can be effectively combined with task-based instruments; this could make the research more enjoyable, and help to maintain interest (Hunleth 2011). For example, the use of participatory photo interviews (also referred to photovoice⁶) as a visual technique may be highlighted (Zartler – Richter 2014; Jorgenson – Sullivan 2010). Similarly, eliciting drawings with younger children or using diary writing might be also an efficient tactic (Punch 2002a). In sum, combining traditional and task-based techniques can result in rich findings (Punch 2002b).

Furthermore, concerning the different linguistic abilities of children, observation of children and spending some time learning their use of language and adapting their vocabulary might be a good strategy (Gibson 2012).

To sum up the issues with competence, researchers are faced with the challenge of selecting the appropriate age group and also of choosing appropriate methods with which to investigate children with different skills and competences. Researchers must remain aware of the nature of childhood development, and should combine this knowledge with their personal experience of children.

Gatekeeping – parents

Dilemmas

It is of high priority that children who participate in research are protected. This goal in some ways conflicts with the need to promote children's research participation, as presented above (Hanafin et al. 2014). The requirement of the primacy of protection of children, because of their vulnerability, raises several issues.

6 Photovoice refers to the method whereby children take pictures about specific topics that are later presented and discussed during an interview.

To protect children, there is consensus that the consent of adults – primarily of parents – is required for their research participation (Hanafin et al. 2014; Hill 2005). The reason for this is children's legal status; namely, that they are dependent on parents, and researchers typically contact them through adults. Depending on the subject and the location of the research, different people may be gatekeepers (primarily parents, but also teachers and educators) (Hill 2005). With a focus on family research, parental gatekeeping is discussed below.

First of all, parental gatekeeping considerably influences the recruitment of the research participants (Hanafin et al. 2014). Although many countries have ratified the above-mentioned UN convention supporting the right of children to form an opinion about certain issues (especially when they are mature enough to do so, such as when they are teenagers), if parents do not consent, children may not participate in research regardless of their willingness (Hill 2005). Sensitive research topics and questions (concerning, for example, drug use, domestic violence, adolescents' sexual behavior, etc.) and the time-consuming nature of certain types of research (such as the individual interview) might cause parents to reject their participation (Hanafin et al. 2014). However, parental consent might also affect children's contributions since it is more difficult for children to refuse to participate if their parents wish them to do so. Situations may occur when the child is moody, feels uncomfortable, or does not really wish to cooperate with the researcher (Hill 2005). For this reason, Warin (2011) suggests the practice of reflexivity in the form of remaining ethically mindful of the disparity between gatekeeper consent and children's consent.

Furthermore, another difficulty is that parents often have the right to be present during interviews. This problem particularly arises at home and can significantly influence and bias children's responses. Mothers often want to be present at interviews and to have some degree of control over their child's answers – especially with a younger child – in order to convey a picture of a happy and healthy family (Mauthner 1997: 19). Moreover, parental presence seriously undermines an atmosphere of confidentiality and the child's right to privacy, such as data protection (Hanafin et al. 2014). This problem mainly emerges during family research when the diverse perspectives of several family members are the focus of investigation (Mauthner 1997).

Suggestions

Managing parental gatekeeping in family research is one of the most challenging issues. Building trust with parents and explaining the research process and goals comprehensively can be effective strategies for ensuring

parents do not dominate (Hill 2005). In this process, pre-meetings with the family might permit causal conversation that enhances trust in the researcher (Gibson 2012). Additionally, offering detailed information about the research and avoiding conducting interviews at the first meeting can help mitigate this effect of gatekeeping, even if parents are ultimately present during interviews.

Notwithstanding this fact, the presence of parents may be also reassuring for the child, making them feel more comfortable with the researcher and strengthening cooperation (Hill 2005). However, researching family functioning from diverse perspectives can make it especially difficult to obtain reliable data from children in the presence of parents. The ideal solution may be when the interview takes place in an open space, but out of parental earshot. However, this is not feasible in many households, or if parents cannot fully accept the child's right to privacy. In this case, participants may answer sensitive questions in written form (Hanafin et al. 2014).

Lastly, and most importantly, researchers should reflect on parental presence and on their reasons for wanting to be included in the research environment. Parental influence should be continuously negotiated by the researcher, and should be seriously taken into account during data analyses and interpretation.

In conclusion, adult gatekeeping may affect the participation of children and decrease the reliability of data. This effect can be mitigated by building trust in the researcher, and by comprehensively describing the research processes in advance. Also, the presence of parents should be reflected on during the process of analysis and dissemination.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this section that reflects on the above-discussed dilemmas, methodological implications related to research into parental time are summarized (see Table 1). Our research is currently in the design phase. At this point arises the issue of target group selection, and of specific methodological and ethical challenges related to research with children.

The forthcoming research is designed to investigate the role of time in family dynamics based on the time parents and children spend together. It seeks to examine how shared time is connected with the use of technology, and will explore features, quality and perceptions of time. The research thus applies a qualitative methodological approach which is appropriate for investigating the quality component of time and family members' perceptions about it. Moreover, the qualitative approach supports in-depth understanding of preferences and

strategies related to time use, use of technology, and related attempts to create balance. Since we aim to explore family members' perspectives of shared time and of family dynamics, and to compare the perspectives of parents and children, the research will involve conducting linked, semi-structured interviews with both parties (at least one parent and the child) separately.

Previous research projects suggest the application of several methods; a combination of traditional and task-based techniques. On the one hand, using task-based methods may empower children; on the other hand, this approach may also be adjusted to the diversity of competences and preferences. Based on this previous research experience, we are considering involving photos and diaries in our research. Similarly to with participatory photo interviews, children can be asked to take photos of their technological environment (Jorgenson – Sullivan 2010). This can facilitate the establishment of rapport and comprehensive observation of domestic scenes. Asking children to write diaries about one of their typical weekdays and weekend days might also be an effective way of obtaining information about children's everyday lives (Punch 2002a).

Concerning target group selection, the issue of competences in relation to the research topic has been considered. It was important to choose an age group which will be competent to participate in semi-structured qualitative interviews. In spite of the critique of age-based differentiation, the literature suggests that individual interviews may be successfully conducted with older school-aged children.

Furthermore, the field of research often affects the definition of the age group. Since we consider the impact of technology use on shared time to be significant, we have chosen to investigate adolescents. Also, investigations of technology suggest that there is a spectacular change in children's use of technology at around ten years of age. Moreover, previous empirical findings confirm that teenagers' use of technology is very intensive and differs from adults' (Aarsand 2007; Dén-Nagy et al. 2012). These facts also motivated our research interest and influenced the definition of the target group, selected as individuals aged between 12 and 16 years.

The issue of the research location arose related to empowerment and parental gatekeeping. The home environment is the most practical choice for investigating parental time when both parent and child are being addressed. Moreover, earlier research experience underlines the more confidential and more informal nature of interviewing at home. Furthermore, since the research also focuses on the use of technology at home, the present researchers decided that such an approach would be especially useful for obtaining further insight into families' living spaces.

Related to the investigation of parental time, the exploration of the satisfaction and opinions of family members – especially children's – make the subject

particularly sensitive. Previous qualitative research experience confirms the tendency for participants to present the family as a unit (Jordan 2006). As a result, it can be difficult to obtain valid and reliable answers about family functioning and relations (Mauthner 1997). For this reason, use of the ‘secret-box’ that allows answers to sensitive questions to be given in written form is considered potentially beneficial.

In addition, the potential impact of parental presence must also be taken into account. We consider important the provision of detailed information to research participants about the investigation (its process and aims). Moreover, pre-meetings with families can be used to decrease the chance of parental presence by building trust in the interviewer.

Lastly, the practice of reflexivity is needed because of the sensitive nature of the issue, and of parental influence. Moreover, the circumstances of the research must be taken into consideration in the process of data analysis and interpretation.

Table 1: Methodological and ethical dilemmas related to research with children

Dilemmas	Recommendations	Authors' response/plan
<i>Unequal power relations</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • influence on research participation • issue of social desirability (reliability and validity) • impact of research location (having control) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – double effect of home environment: self-sufficiency vs. intrusion – researcher's diverse role in home environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comprehensive information, request informed consent • form partnerships with children • use innovative/task-based research methods • practice reflexivity, recognize ethically important moments • support freedom of choice regarding the research conditions/settings • keep reflecting on the researcher's presence in the home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comprehensive information, request informed consent from parents and children • pre-meet families to establish confidential relationships • use individual interviews and integrate photo interviews and/or diaries • interview at home: influence of the research topic • establish boundaries in advance, support flexibility, continuously adapt to participants' needs
<i>Competence</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the issue of defining the target group: diversity vs. commonality in same age groups • choosing developmentally appropriate research methods • diversity in skills, competences • different linguistic abilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • critical selection of cases by age, ignoring researchers' preconceptions; at the same time, being aware of developmental level of specific age group • use variety of research methods, a combination of traditional and task-based techniques • learn the child's use of language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • define target group (12-16 years) according to research topic (technology use) and cognitive level of development when conducting individual interviews • involve other techniques (photos/diaries) • use experiences from pilot research to adapt to children's vocabulary
<i>(Parental) gatekeeping</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • defining research participation • double effect of parental presence • interviewing at home: reliability, data protection, right to privacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offer detailed information about the research • revisit the child's choice to participate • allow answers to sensitive questions to be given in written form • take research settings into account in data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inform participants in written form and verbally • remain reflexive in terms of participation • integrate 'secret box' and other similar instruments to facilitate written answers • take parental presence and other influential factors of home environment into account in data analysis and interpretation

CONCLUSION

The new conceptualizations of childhood and the interpretation of children as a social group are enabling researchers to carry out comparative research (Christensen – Prout 2005). Moreover, this approach will help with combining the perceptions and experiences of parents and children in a forthcoming investigation of parental time. This paper has discussed the methodological dilemmas of research with children, focusing mainly on the qualitative interview.

The new sociology of childhood highlights the diversity of childhood but also emphasizes its universal nature. On the one hand, the conception of childhood as a social construct has allowed the recognition of childhood diversity. On the other hand, this has resulted in children being defined as a unified social group, with specific similarities (Christensen – Prout 2005). Therefore, in designing and conducting research with children it is highly important to find a balance between these viewpoints (diversity and commonality). The researcher's preconceptions about children and childhood significantly determine the research method, thus it is important to remain reflexive about these preconceptions at the stage of research design.

The most important source of ethical and methodological problems in research with children is the inequality of power between adults and children (researcher and participants). Concerning this issue, two key points are underlined. On the one hand, the importance of choosing an appropriate method has been highlighted. A combination of innovative, task-based techniques and traditional methods can support empowerment. On the other hand, addressing children's rights to make decisions related to participation, location, or the research process may contribute to building trust in the researcher.

Furthermore, the researcher's appraisal of how competent children are in terms of research participation is also a significant determinant of the methodological approach. The selection of method plays an important role concerning the issue of competence. Based on previous empirical experience, it is suggested that a combination of traditional and innovative techniques can be adapted to individual competences; moreover, this approach is interesting for participants and also supports a multifaceted process of data collection (Punch 2002a).

The research topic may also determine which age group will be investigated because of the common experiences of children in the same age groups. However, age-based selection should be done critically according to an appraisal of children's competences. The researcher should remain aware of their preconceptions, so that the diversity that exists within children of a single age group is represented.

While numerous researchers have argued for children's involvement in investigations because of their thus-far ignored perspectives and the need to support their participatory rights, the priority that must be given to protecting children can significantly affect their participation. Related to this, the role of parental gatekeeping should be underlined. Provision of detailed information about the aims of the research is one solution for avoiding parental presence, especially when investigating family dynamics. Otherwise, when interpreting and disseminating results potential parental influence should be taken into account.

In conclusion, in research with children the importance of reflexivity should be emphasized. The researcher should reflect on their own role and preconceptions; moreover, reflexivity should be evident in the choice of method, and present throughout the research. By this means, more ethical research can be carried out.

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