



FOUR CORNERSTONES OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN

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Abstract:

How to conduct childhood research from the children's point of view? Among various methods, ethnography has proven to be a method by which researchers are able to find the reality of children's lives and symbolic messages within the reality of children. The researcher must be open to set aside his / her adult-like thinking and jump right into children's experiences, feelings, and interactions to find the understanding of child-centered answers. How is this done? We divide the critical stages of ethnographic childhood research into four: 1) acquiring material, 2) assuming the role of a researcher, 3) reaching the child's voice, and 4) describing the results to open up the world of children. This article opens up a discussion also about researchers' preparedness to self-reflect and ethical perspectives in ethnographic childhood research. Ethnographic research helps to see a child's world and can thus contribute to children's wellbeing and education.

Keywords: ethnography, children, childhood research, child orientation

1. Introduction

Childhood affects parents of children, kindergarten staff, and school. Ultimately, people in every generation are united by the same desire to safely ensure the next generation face the challenges that lie ahead in life as well as to enjoy the richness of life. Childhood provides the basis for adulthood, but childhood itself is a valuable stage in life. Childhood research has aroused increasing interest in educational sciences (Uusiautti & Määttä 2013). As educational knowledge expands and research methods evolve, so can knowledge of the reality of children. Understanding the reality experienced in childhood

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also contributes to supporting children's well-being and development when designing educational interventions and educational environments.

There are several methods for obtaining scientific information about children's experiences. Over the past two decades, ethnography has emerged as a viable starting point for looking at children's lives (Konstantoni & Kustatscher 2015; Qvortrup 2000). Children have been studied with an ethnographic approach, especially in the context of school and kindergarten (Gallacher & Gallagher 2008; Köngäs 2018; Köngäs & Määttä 2021; Rantala & Määttä 2013) and in the home environment (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä 2012). Ethnography can also be used to obtain information about the reality of a life of children with disabilities (Kangas, Määttä & Uusiautti 2012; Lasanen, Määttä, & Uusiautti 2017).

How to conduct ethnographic research so that it reaches a different spectrum or specificity of children's perspectives? The purpose of this article is to describe the cornerstones of the ethnographic method as a childhood study. What are its key perspectives and steps in bringing out a true picture of a child's world of experience? The article is based on our previous research (Kangas, Määttä, & Uusiautti 2012; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä 2012, 2013; Köngäs & Määttä 2021; Lasanen, Määttä, & Uusiautti 2017; Peltokorpi, Määttä, & Uusiautti 2011; Rantala & Määttä 2013) and dissertation by author one (Köngäs 2018).

2. Ethnography as a methodology

Ethnography refers to the term people (ethno) writing (graphics). Ulla-Maija Salo (1999) states in her research that a graphic could also refer to drawing or narration as a word, but within cultural research, it is mainly interpreted as descriptive writing (Goetz & LeCompte 1984; Salo 1999; Spindler 1982).

Educational ethnography can be considered to have made its entry as early as the 1950s when a counter-reaction to quantitative educational psychological measurements, tests, and statistics was sought. Ethnographies emphasized that standardized results could not describe and explain reality within a school or educational reality (Delamont 2002).

Ethnography is qualitative research. It is considered to be a particularly suitable research approach when: 1) the nature of the social phenomenon is studied, 2) the material is unstructured, 3) the subject of the study is a small number of cases, 4) the analysis aims to elucidate the purposes and meanings of human activity, and 5) the interpretation leans mainly on descriptions and explanations of concrete situations (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994; Köngäs 2018).

Ethnographic research is characterized by 1) approaching the phenomenon with empirical observation, 2) not approaching the study according to a predetermined coding, in which case the researcher must be willing to change his / her perceptions as the research progresses, and 3) integrating research results as a part of wider historical and cultural framework (Atkinson & Hammersley 2007; Baszanger & Dodier 1997; Emond 2005; Fielding 2016).

Within ethnography, refinements can be made about what kind of research it is about, such as confessional ethnography, life history, autoethnography, feminist ethnography, or ethnographic narratives (Creswell 2007; LeCompte, Millroy & Preissle 1992). Ethnographies can also be divided according to disciplinary questions, such as sociological, psychological, or educational ethnography (Goetz & LeCompte 1984; Gordon 2002; Pole & Morrison 2003; Spindler 1982). Ethnography can also be named according to the context in which it is done, such as kindergarten ethnography (Kögäs 2018).

3. Special features of childhood research

Childhood research is part of social and cultural research. In childhood research, there is an interest in what kind of perspectives the research of children and childhood includes or has included. This research tendency was developed in the 1980s among sociologists and educational scientists, but today childhood research openly brings together several researchers from different disciplines. Common to all childhood research is the goal of understanding children and childhood as members of communities and actors in cultures (James, Jenks & Prout 1998; James & Prout 2015).

The terms child-centered and child initiative come to the fore in childhood research. Term child-centered is localized more in the practical work with children where the needs and wishes of children are taken into account in the best possible way by professionals of education and safety. In the child initiative approach on the other hand the child's best is defined by children and not adults (Kögäs 2018; Tinworth 1997).

The starting point for the child perspective study is information that is obtained from the children themselves or in the production of which the children themselves participate. The children's perspective in research shows up as symbolic messages within children's culture, such as words, sounds, and expressions, which the researcher seeks to interpret in order to understand children's experiences, feelings, and understanding of childhood. (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide 2010). The idea of child-centeredness is to emphasize children's subjectivity in relation to the research phenomenon. Children don't communicate only by words, but one should seek to hear the consistent and genuine information children are striving for with the nonverbal messages they provide (James & James 2008).

Current childhood research emphasizes the role of children as valid actors and producers of culture, whether at the macro level in society or at the micro-level in peer cultures. Childhood is seen as an absolute value. In this case, childhood research seeks to make societal childhood and its processes visible, and ethnographic research is often best suited to these (James & Prout 2015; Kögäs 2018; Kögäs & Määttä 2021).

4. Purpose of the article

The purpose of this article is to describe the key stages and choices of ethnographic childhood research based on our previous research work on children (e.g. Kögäs 2018;

Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä 2012, 2013; Köngäs & Määttä 2021), applying ethnography to childhood research and considering the key elements of childhood research and ethnography.

There are several methods of obtaining scientific information about children's experiences, and over the past two decades, ethnography has emerged as a common starting point for describing children's lives (Konstantoni & Kustatscher 2015; Qvortrup 2000), especially in school and kindergarten contexts (Köngäs 2018). Ethnographic research has also provided more insight into new childhood research, with both ethnography and new childhood research defining children as equal interpreters of social truth and committing themselves to children's views in producing information (James 2001; James & Prout 2015; Lange & Mierendoff 2009). Ethnographic longitudinal studies would be welcome (Corsaro & Eden 1999).

How to conduct ethnographic research in such a way that the child's voice and reality are open to the researcher who is a representative of adult culture? Is the so-called "foreign culture researcher" able to hear the children's honest voice from the material? Are children too unfamiliar group to the ethnographer and the current childhood too unfamiliar field for reliable analysis? Does children's culture ever allow adults to enter their world? (Gallacher & Gallagher 2008; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä 2013; Lange & Mierendoff 2009; Punch 2002; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher 2009; Warming 2011).

What choices should a researcher make and what steps should he or she pay special attention to when conducting ethnographic and child-centered research on the child's reality? The researcher has a great responsibility for the children and must not in any way produce annoyance, harm or anxiety to the children (See Graue & Wash 1998; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä 2012; Peltokorpi, Määttä & Uusiautti 2011). The researcher's choices, as well as his or her way of interacting with children, are also ethical because children are very heterogeneous in their sensitivity in terms of skills and learning abilities. Yet knowledge of the nature of childhood and the special features of children's culture is particularly valuable and creating new knowledge, and therefore also ethnographically important.

5. Results

We divide the critical stages of ethnographic childhood research into four: 1) acquiring material, 2) assuming the role of a researcher, 3) reaching the child's voice, and 4) describing the results to open up the world of children.

5.1 How to obtain the material

The term 'data collection' has been a nuisance when talking about ethnography, as one can also think that the material to be analyzed is rather recorded through the researcher in the time spent in the field. Even if the ethnographer has defined a certain framework for material, it is only in the field that the words, deeds, nonverbal messages, and symbols of the members of the culture form useful material. An ethnographer can set out to pursue his or her material through, for example, various observations, interviews, children's

drawings, or other documents and artifacts. Here we focus on observation as a form of material acquisition.

Ethnographic observation makes it possible to obtain information about real events without the need for participants to reflect on the situation. Still, it is not easy to observe, and the collection of the material requires the ability to merge with the research group without drowning in the middle. The observer needs to record the actions as authentically as possible to ensure reliability (Bogdan & Biklen 2007; Emond 2005; Merriam 2009).

Ethnographic observation is time-consuming and the material may at times feel excessive, difficult to control, confused, or repetitive. In this case, a research diary is a good help in supporting the observational data. The research diary is separate from observational material and includes the researcher's feelings, difficulties, successes, ideas, interpretations, or linking observations to theoretical knowledge. Field notes, on the other hand, are those in which the aim is to write as authentically as possible the event and context as seen and heard, the dates and times. The research diary can later support the reflection and analysis of the material (Emond 2005; Richards & Morse 2007).

A camcorder can be a great help and gives an objective picture of the phenomenon under study. It can also be less invisible and minimizes the control effect, it doesn't misinterpret or misunderstood. The same video footage can be viewed from different perspectives and can be used to confirm events as well as recall insights that one may not have had time to write down.

Using filming in childhood research has its pros and cons. During shooting, children may cover the camcorder, turn their backs on the camcorder (making it difficult to interpret expressions), or move too close to the camcorder. The blind spot is one of the biggest ongoing problems with video recording. Important situations can occur out of the reach of the camera, relying only on audio material. This makes it difficult to reliably identify subjects, as well as excluding view to nonverbal communication. Things that affect children's activities can also occur outside the video camera (Walsh, et al. 2007). For example, in kindergarten, a staff member sitting and watching children play.

Filming children's activities can be easier than the traditional pen-and-paper method, as children's activities are often extremely fast without traditional courtesy rules that adults obey, such as waiting for their turn, considering the issue, and staying put. Capturing children's culture through videos requires detailed and close-contact filming (Walsh, et al. 2007). Children's attitudes toward the camcorder do not follow any clear line. Sometimes children struggle for attention to be at the center of the shooting beam, while sometimes they don't even notice it. Children do not see the camcorder as an interesting device but as an opportunity to see themselves through the eyes of an outsider. The camcorder acts as a mirror of children's culture for themselves and from themselves.

5.2 How to take on the role of a researcher

Ethnographic research requires the researcher to become acquainted with the researched phenomenon carefully and in many ways. He/she must have a theoretical frame of

reference to guide the research work as well as the collection of material. The researcher should make clear to himself/herself his / her attitude towards the children under study, the interaction with them, and the research situations.

The degree of observer participation must also be considered: whether the researcher is participatory or non-participant. The degree of participation also varies from the objective observer to the fully involved actor (the participant-observer continuum) (Bogdan & Biklen 2007; Jones & Somekh 2005; Robinson & Savenye 2008).

Participant observation in a childhood study often guarantees approval by the subjects. In most cases, the researcher cannot be completely outside, in which case it is best for him or her to spend time building trust in the community before observing the details of children's activities. When observing children, the researcher may eventually appear in two roles; both as a participant and an observer. By participating, she or he demonstrates his / her own acceptance of children's activities, and in doing so, they too more easily allow the researcher to move into the role of observer. An outsider researcher can confuse children, arouse suspicion, and uncertainty weakens children's courage to be themselves (Emond 2005).

Yet in observation, there is always the possibility that the researcher is perceived as an external distraction. Nevertheless, the researcher should strive to approach all his or her observations objectively. An adult is hardly able to give the impression that he or she is "one of the members of the culture". The researcher may try to think of himself as a friend, helper, non-adult, unauthorized, or entertainer (Hedegaard 2008; Holmes 2008; James 2001), but in the end, the definition is made by the children themselves (Atkinson & Hammersley 2007; Christensen 2004; Corsaro & Molinari 2000; Jenks 2000; Konstantoni & Kustatscher 2015; Mayall 2008; Mukherji & Albon 2010). Often, the easiest choice is to communicate one's role honestly and openly, seeking linguistic expressions such that children understand.

Reaching for children's guardians to obtain research permits is absolute, but relatively effortless. Ensuring children's consent is important and perhaps more difficult. Achieving consent from children is difficult because of children's little understanding of the research process and meanings (Atkinson & Hammersley 2007; Corsaro & Eden 1999; Emond 2005). The child may be willing to interact with the researcher but not willing to share the communication that occurred in their encounters with anyone else, or the child may want to participate in some areas of research (such as videotaping) but not others (such as an interview).

The researcher can be perceived as an intruder in the research community when collecting research material as a person outside the community. Researchers' uncertainty can increase if there is uncertainty about how to best make know researchers' role for both children and adults. The situation is eased by thorough planning, information, and the construction of co-operation and joint agreements before data collection. It is also up to the ethnographer to openly express his or her rights as a researcher.

5.3 How to reach a child's voice?

Ethnography has faced suspicion of reaching children's voices (Gallacher & Gallagher 2008; Lange & Mierendoff 2009; Punch 2002; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher 2009; Warming 2011), although it is a valued research method in childhood research (James & Prout 2015; Konstantoni & Kustatscher 2015; Qvortrup 2000).

All forms of information acquisition require special sensitivity from the researcher. Obtaining information about children's views and experiences by interviewing children requires the researcher to have special child knowledge, a child-respecting approach, and fair and honest treatment. The child should be encouraged to talk about his or her open perceptions, but his or her way of speaking or willingness to tell may be hindered either by a lack of expression or because he or she does not feel part of the research process (Peltokorpi, Määttä & Uusiautti 2011). The child may not understand why he or she is being asked things, he or she may feel pressured, the questions may feel stressful and complex, or he or she may have fears about the correctness of his or her answers, his or her failure, or self-esteem (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä 2013). Children are prone to giving answers they think adults expect of them (O'Reilly et al. 2013).

When studying children, a particular ethical challenge relates to seeing the role of the child in the study. The essential question is how the researcher sees the child in the research. In ethnographic research, hearing a child's voice requires a child-centered approach, observing and acquiring information about children from themselves without adult guidance. Like adults, children create their own culture and learn and change in constant interaction with the environment (Corsaro 2012; James & James 2008)

It is important for the researcher interviewing the child to be able to look for unspoken words in the interview situation rather than the interpretation of said words, because often due to adult dominance children assume a three-part interaction structure where 1) the adult inquires, 2) the child answers and 3) adult silently assesses child's response (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson 2010; Köngäs 2018; Punch 2002). The child should be relaxed. The presence of the researcher should be calm, participatory, and patient. Time should be used for making the child feel safe and at ease.

The researcher is responsible for his / her research throughout the process. When doing ethnographic research, the researcher has to practice reflective thinking and he or she should be able to understand the situations he or she encounters without preconceived notions from childhood (Peltokorpi, Määttä & Uusiautti 2011). It is not easy to put aside adult focus. In childhood research, the researcher must ensure that he or she is able to break free from the adult point of view. It is so easy for a researcher to look at research material that only reinforces an existing practice or one's own understanding. The ability to rule out the obvious as well as the ability to look at and towards the child is at the heart of ethnographic childhood research.

5.4 How to describe the results?

There is no single right way to analyze data. The analysis is a process involving insights, inspiring aha experiences, and connections to theoretical starting points (Flick 2007;

Smith 2002) as well as a reflection on all of this (Pole & Morrison 2003). There might be a rationale for testing several different methods and analysis can be seen more as a desire to experiment than as uncertainty (Konstantoni & Kustatscher 2015). In ethnography, the researcher must consider both the effects of his or her physical presence on the material and the effect of mental thought patterns on the results (Wacquant 2005). In childhood research, this is particularly relevant.

In good ethnographic research, the researcher is able to arouse interest in understanding children's development, emotional world, emotional behavior, and culture. At its best, an accurate description of the collection of research material, a careful description of the analysis of the material, and a detailed description of the results will make the reader experience the research reality and be convinced of the phenomenon under study from the children's world.

There is no doubt that elements of status and roles are present in the collection and analysis of material on children (Konstantoni & Kustatscher 2015). When working with children, reflexivity is often an emotional process. Because of children's hectic constructive nonverbal communication, reflexivity in observational data may need to be implemented time and time again. The researcher may need to reflect multiple times on the same manifestations in different contexts. On the other hand, this is often also the high point of research for the ethnographer and provides experience in understanding the phenomenon under study and getting into the culture of children (Davis, Watson & Cunningham-Burley 2000; Delamont 2007).

Generating a child-centered research report requires a lot of work and constant vigilance on the part of the researcher to banish their adult-centredness. Researchers days fill up by the repeated reading of transcribed material, searching for answers to various questions (such as; who / who did what, why did, why exactly what he/she was doing, how the act was seen, how the act started, how the act ended, who influenced the act), finding identifiable similarities to the theories used as prerequisites, recognizing whether the material contains confirmation of the assumptions that arose in the field, and making sense what feels foreign or contrary to the assumptions in the material (Ford 2014; Reifel 2007; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater 2012; Wolcott 1999). The material can be encountered like a new person is when introduced for the first time. Then a variety of new information is learned from another. Some are relevant, some less relevant, but all create the basis for the familiarity that you need to dare to trust the answers you receive in the end to the most important (research interest) questions. Finally, embarking on the path of actual interpretation, the researcher may find that he or she has acquired a completely new-looking material, not just the surface of the raw material, but a packet of easily approachable data (Kögäs 2018). Although the material may at first seem disappointing, confusing, and uncontrollable, as well as arouse feelings of despair, it makes one of a kind use it when one dares to spend time on one's material and its reporting.

Research findings should refer to the most "pure" research outcome possible, regardless of the researcher's personality (Pillow 2003). In most cases, ethnography is expected to provide the reader with a perspective on the researcher's thought patterns as

well as their change as a result of the field (Coffey 1999). Sometimes it is also considered skillful reflexivity to write a researcher out of a text rather than into it (K ng s 2018).

A prerequisite for successful child-centered ethnographic result description is a strong theoretical background and the examination of field-stage data using different methods of analysis. Reflection of the obtained material in the light of research questions yields results that describe the phenomenon studied with examples and episodes.

6. Discussion

Ethnography has, for its part, changed child-related research (James 2001; Rantala & M  tt  2013). Ethnography enables the conducting of research on children in their own environment and on the children's own terms. A child should not be considered immature, incomplete, or not socialized (Bendelow & Mayall, 2002; James, 2001). Instead, a child is seen as capable of expressing his / her feelings, thoughts, and opinions as well as being capable of making decisions and participating in the evaluation and planning of his / her actions (Prout & James 1990). At its best, ethnographic research is not only implemented among children but also with them.

In ethnographic research, the researcher should strive to give a balanced picture of childhood. That is a challenging goal for many reasons. In order to achieve a child's experience, there must be an open and equal interaction between the researcher and the child, and the researcher must be sensitive to act ethically correctly in different situations. It should also be noted that not all children or groups of children have the opportunity to bring out their voice (Vanderbroeck, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie 2010).

Basically, childhood research follows the same ethical principles as any research and that is called ethical symmetry. The study does not differentiate based on the age of the subjects but focuses on the situation-specific assessment of ethical practices in the study (Christensen & Prout 2002).

Ethics in ethnographic research is usually closed up around three perspectives. Examining the legitimacy of 1) research topic, 2) research methods, and 3) analysis (Bogdan & Biklen 2007). There has also been discussion about the so-called Mengele and Manhattan cases, 2018. Mengele's case concentrates on the data collection and protection of the research subjects. Manhattan case concentrates on the responsibility in reporting results. As well as the honest disclosure of the research results, also subjects' knowledge and consent become important elements in the ethics of research (K ng s 2018).

One of the measures of reliability in ethnographic research has been considered to be the long-term fieldwork phase (Lasanen, M  tt  & Uusiautti 2017). A longer time spent together promotes access to open information: over time, children find it easier to talk about things, they don't have to pinch in different situations, nor do they have to be unaware of what it's all about or what they should do. It has also been suggested that the reliability of childhood ethnography be strengthened by involving children in interpreting and commenting on the material during data collection. Ross & Hillman (2008) went through the material and results for each of the children in their study individually.

The reliability of ethnographic research is also ultimately assessed by the reader's experience of whether interpretations appear to be consistent with the experiences being studied. It is up to the researcher's professionalism how well he or she can construct the views produced by the subjects in his or her text and also how well he or she can produce them in a readable form in research. In other words, does the text convey interpretations of the subjects only appropriately or really aptly (Becker 1996)? Has the researcher repeated only the words of the subjects or interpreted between the lines (Kirk & Miller 1986)? The topic can also be spoken of as credible and can be thought of as reflecting an important concept of competence in quantitative research (Becker 1996).

Ethnographic and child-centered research can be carried out in many different ways. Children know their own lives and know what they have experienced. Yet children are not a cohesive, homogeneous group, but each has its own self. Childhood research must be based on respect for the child's individuality (Uusiautti & M  tt  2013).

The careful and planned implementation of data collection is important. For the researcher, a sense of credibility is often brought by saturation when recurrence in the field is evident (Kirk & Miller 1986). In video material, reliability is partly affected by the successful storage of data. It is easy to return to a successful video throughout the analysis. Portability can be examined in ethnographic research with the necessary dense description. Research results are not intended to be generalized in a stereotypical way, but through readability, readers can deduce in which other similar contexts interpretations may be valid (Corsaro & Eden 1999).

In childhood research, the goal is often to improve the well-being of children. Research is also hoped to bring new insights into grievances or misunderstandings in children's daily lives (Hill 2005; Mayall 1999) This goal can also be referred to as the 'Starting Strong Agenda' (Farrel 2015). When conducting ethnographic research, an educator in the field of education often makes observations already in the field about grievances that he or she would like a more positive change with his or her research results. Objectively, the researcher is aware of the social framework of action, but can subjectively yet boldly defend the interpretation he or she sees as correct about the state of education because only in this way is development possible.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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