A Response to Sandra Karlsson

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Research on children’s rights within human sciences is rich in research perspectives and methods. Research methods include quantitative methods as well as qualitative and mixed methods. Within qualitative research, research methods on children’s rights range from archive studies, legal science analysis and other document analysis to first-hand observations, interviews, and participatory approaches. Each method has its advantages and drawbacks, and a researcher’s choice of method will depend on the discipline and the questions to be explored.

An issue common to all areas of human sciences is how to include the views of the research subjects – in this context, the children’s own views – in research (and practice) while neither victimizing nor patronizing these children. This fundamental challenge is explored by Sandra Karlsson.

A starting point is the quest for empirical knowledge on children’s rights on not only a policy level but in their everyday lives. Yet another point of departure (although this approach is not spelled out in Karlsson’s chapter) is that the more vulnerable the child is, the more crucial the legal rights the child could invoke. For asylum-seeking children in Sweden, the CRC is important owing to its influence on legislation as well as its application in individual cases. Karlsson points to yet another aspect of children’s rights: how to understand ways in which children identify themselves and claim their rights. She discusses the concept of children’s ‘lived rights’.

In her ethnographic research on children’s lived rights, Sandra Karlsson has chosen a participatory method. This choice is inspired by an ambition to give children more influence in the research process. During her year of fieldwork with asylum-seeking children aged six to twelve, Karlsson participated in the children’s lives by walking, talking, and playing with them.

Through this method, she detects children’s critical articulation of what is being denied them, their claims for recognition, and their critique of being treated according to social position instead of personhood. Her observations are focused on interpreting body language, affective reactions, facial expressions, and bodily postures as well as verbal expressions. The research method includes an analysis of what children express through their fears, children’s perceived aggressiveness, and how Karlsson’s notion of ‘lived fear,’ affects children’s ‘lived rights’.
Among the challenges associated with participatory methods – and recognizable from other face-to-face research methods – are power asymmetries. Within Childhood Studies, the asymmetry in child-adult relations is added to the more generally recognized asymmetry between the researcher and the informants. One way to reduce this asymmetry and enhance research subjects’ integrity is to ensure secrecy as to the identity of the research person and the provision of informed consent. In Karlsson’s research on asylum-seeking children, participating children’s verbal consent was continually renegotiated, in addition to the parents’ written consent.

Sandra Karlsson continues by discussing how she made a ‘decision to take sides with the children’ as a way to respect their integrity during her fieldwork. As with all good intentions, it is interesting to explore possible drawbacks of this approach. One such drawback could be that the children might develop increased expectations on the researcher’s ability to enhance their lived rights. Another (at least theoretical) downside could be the researcher’s possible tendency to take sides not only with the child, but against key persons in the child’s life, such as parents or siblings. Karlsson approaches some of these challenges in her description of how a child who was excluded from the research project, because his parent(s) did not provide consent, was eager to be included in a play-like phase of the fieldwork. As a result of the child’s expressed wishes to be part of the research, he was included in the group of children that wrote and drew with the researcher, and the non-consenting parent was informed afterwards.

To me, this dilemma takes us back to the fundamental power asymmetry between researcher and research subjects – children and adults alike. I wonder how the integrity and vulnerability of the asylum-seeking child as well as the parents and the family as a whole should be regarded. This issue in turn mirrors the crucial question: who is best positioned to determine what is in the best interests of the child – the child, the parents, or the professional decision-maker or the researcher.