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## **TREADING ON A MINEFIELD – ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN**

### **ABSTRACT**

The article discusses ethical dilemmas in qualitative research with children and proposes potential solutions. The conduct of social researchers is regulated by strict ethical standards, but studies of children are fraught with numerous doubts and pitfalls. The author describes ethical dilemmas during an ethnographic study of 5-year-olds, which investigated the peer learning process in preschoolers. The following ethical aspects of social research were discussed: a child's informed consent to participate in a study, the risk of collecting unimportant research material, the observer effect and the risk of data bias, the risk of negative reinforcement in studies of children, data confidentiality and disclosure of the information relating to the study site. The dynamic character of research with children, the effect of context on ethical decision-making, and the need to balance the role of a researcher with other social roles were emphasized.

#### Keywords:

research ethics, peer learning, preschoolers, observation, qualitative research.

### **Introduction**

Research into childhood and research involving children has been garnering increasing interest since the 1970s, and it has contributed to the development of the relevant research methods. The paradigms of sociological research into childhood have evolved over the years. The classical paradigm

in the sociological study of childhood formulated by James and Prout (1990), in particular the hypothesis postulating that childhood is a social construct and children are actors who actively participate in social life, have prompted changes in the methodology and the ethical standards applicable to research with children. Various research methods and approaches are still encountered in social sciences, but the interest in qualitative strategies has been increasing since the 1990s. Qualitative strategies are deployed to engage children in the research process as subjects whose perspectives are heard, and to explore the children's world in all its richness. Several methods are also used simultaneously in research with children to promote self-expression (Darbyshire et al., 2005). In the field of ethics, attempts are being made to maintain an "ethical symmetry" (Christensen, Prout, 2002) and resolve the power imbalance between children and adults (Mason, Hood, 2011). Dedicated ethical standards have been developed for research with children (they are also referred to in this article), and scientists embarking on such research are equipped with some form of an "ethical apparatus". However, studies that explore a child's world with the use of a qualitative model can produce unexpected problems that require other, often spontaneous, ethical decisions.

The aim of the following article is to discuss the dynamics of research involving children as well as ethical dilemmas that may occur in the course of the research. The word "minefield" is often used metaphorically to denote an event or space that puts our previous experiences to the test. This metaphor could be useful for describing a qualitative researcher's efforts to apply analogous ethical standards to children and adults. The act of treading on a minefield symbolizes the decision-making process in situations where the researcher does not know how to respond, is uncertain of his/her emotions, and is unconvinced that the observed situation is relevant to his/her research (Kuźma, 2013). According to Kędzierska (2016), a "minefield" in qualitative research is a space that has to be carefully traversed by the scientist in order to bypass or "defuse" new ethical traps in the field. This article provides a blueprint of a "minefield", namely an ethically challenging situation that can be encountered by a scientist in qualitative research with children.

### **Description of the research project**

The study explored peer learning of preschool children with the aim of identifying what and how children learn from one another in a natural preschool setting. Formal education is a popular object of pedagogic research, but most researchers focus on teacher-directed instruction which is most

commonly associated with education. In this study, peer learning was regarded as an important, but often undervalued element of children's development that requires scientific inquiry. The study was based on the approach proposed by Boud (2001) who defined peer learning as a process during which students learn from and with one another in both formal and informal ways without the teacher's involvement (Boud et al., 1999). The research subjects were 5-year-olds in a public kindergarten in the capital city of a Polish region. Due to epistemological and ontological assumptions, conducted studies fit the interpretative paradigm, which was based on subjectivist premises. As far as studying educational processes is concerned, the paradigm is related to the theories that focus on "a human being functioning in the social world, the world of education and its perception of this world". (Rubacha, 2008, p. 308).

The first stage of the study, the subject of discussion in this article, data collection method involved ethnographic observation, which was based on observing natural, daily rituals of the studied community as well as learning the context of studied events (Rubacha, 2008, s. 153). In the consecutive stage the collected observation material was complemented by conversations with children, which were conducted in small groups. When I entered the kindergarten as my research area, I was a stranger to them. Although they had been informed about my role beforehand, the children got to know me better through interaction. The observations were recorded in the period of six months at the turn of 2017 and 2018, during children's spontaneous interaction, activities that can potentially involve peer learning, namely during play time, conversations, spontaneous art activities and other self-guided activities involving at least two children. Observation templates were not used due to the dynamic and unpredictable character of the observed events that were difficult to catalog and quantify. I assumed that the registered behaviors could be catalogued based on an analysis of the collected data.

Ethical dilemmas surfaced at the data collection stage and they were mostly related to the researcher's relations with the studied subjects. These dilemmas were manifested by dichotomous choices: informed consent or informed dissent, to observe or not to observe, to observe or to create (the studied setting), to observe or to educate, to remain silent or to expose to view.

## Ethical problems in peer learning studies of preschool children

### 1. Subject's informed consent to participate in research

Two types of consent are generally acquired in studies conducted in formal education setting: formal consent (granted by the institution's authorities) and parental consent. Children as subjects of studies are characterized by dual legal status. On the one hand, they are specially protected participants, on the other, their own decisions are irrelevant since they are not legally binding. However, in view of ethical standards, the studied subject, regardless of his/her age, should give his/her consent to participate in research, and that consent should be informed and based on knowledge<sup>1</sup>. In studies conducted from a perspective of ethical symmetry, it is assumed that similarly to adults, children are capable of self-expression and should not receive special treatment (Read et al., 2014). However, American researchers have argued that in studies with children that are not fully autonomous, the concept of informed consent should be replaced by parental permission as well as the child's assent to participate in the study. To avoid controversy and ethical difficulties surrounding substitute decision-making, i.e. consent given by a third party on behalf of an individual, it is assumed that parental consent is not granted on behalf of the child by speculating what the child would decide if he/she had decision-making capacity, but on behalf of the parents as the loving guardians whose decisions are guided by the child's well-being (McCartney, 2011). However, studies that are based on the tenets of the new sociology of childhood can lead to conflict between research practice and ethical principles in social research. Parental consent given on a child's behalf could give rise to a situation where parental consent is denied, even if the child would like to participate in the study (Skelton, 2008).

In the described project, parents whose children participated in the study had been informed about the research goals and procedures, and they had given written permission for their children to participate in the study. However, in view of ethical guidelines and based on my personal belief that

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<sup>1</sup> Guidelines and regulations concerning children's participation in the studies conducted in the European Union are available on the website of the European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/child-participation-research>. Przepisy i wytyczne dotyczące udziału dzieci w badaniach prowadzonych na terenie Unii Europejskiej można znaleźć m.in. na stronie European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/child-participation-research> [access: 20.05.2020].

children are capable decision-makers, I was faced with the imperative of obtaining preschoolers' informed consent to participate in the study. Therefore, I made an attempt to explain the aims of the research and my role in the study during a meeting with preschoolers that was supervised by a teacher. The process of obtaining five-year-olds' consent or assent to participate in the study proved to be quite challenging because the children lacked the necessary experience to comprehend the nature of scientific research and the scientist's role. Therefore, I limited my explanation to the fact that some scientists/researchers attempt to study and describe the "children's world", and that as a scientist, I was interested in finding out how children play and learn from one another. Despite receiving "unanimous" consent to conduct and record my observations, I was quite aware that such declarations have limitations; therefore, I decided that I would attempt to obtain every participant's individual assent to record his/her behavior until the children became aware of the nature of the study, thus empowering them to revoke their initial decision. Children's consent to participate in research has to be continuously negotiated and renegotiated. I assumed that the granted consent was valid when the children continued to play and display natural behavior in my presence. Therefore, the decision to enter the intimate world of playing preschoolers was made inertially based on the absence of informed dissent (Morrow, Richards, 1996), rather the presence of informed consent. At the same time, I remained open to nonverbal cues indicating that the observer's close presence was a source of discomfort for the children. During the study, I had to display ethical sensitivity or, in other words, turn on my "ethical radar" (Nairn, Clark, 2012), and although none of the children objected verbally to my presence, I abandoned my observations in several cases. I was prompted to do so by nonverbal cues, which included children moving their activities to a different part of the room, speaking in hushed voices or ending their conversation when I approached them. Soon after, most children not only did not object to being observed and filmed, but actually demanded my involvement as a sign of attention. However, the above prompted another dilemma where the researcher's attention is drawn to selected children.

## **2. Risk of collecting unimportant research material**

Adults rarely observe children at play for the sake of the game alone, without exercising constructive control. My genuine interest in the game made me a highly desirable companion for several preschoolers. This was possible in situations where I was unable to conduct observations because

official play time was monitored by adults. The initial observer-as-participant stance (Angrosino, 2007) had to be replaced by the participant-as-observer stance, because being unable to conduct “formal” observations in such circumstances, I had little else to do. In such moments, I assisted the children and the teacher in their activities by striking up conversations and offering help, which enabled me to establish closer relations with preschoolers and gain their trust. In such situations, my relations with the children and the teacher were free of ethical dilemmas. Ethical problems appeared only when, prompted by the children demanding attention, I had to decide whether to observe activities that were irrelevant for my peer learning research. I had particular doubts when some children asked to be observed when playing alone. For instance, one of the boys who rarely participated in group play would sit closer to the camera or would ask me to pick up the yellow notebook where I recorded my observations, thus inviting me to observe his behavior. Such requests entailed the risk of unproductive work whose results would not be included in the collected data, and would thus slow down my research. However, I complied with several such requests in fear that my refusal would be a source of discomfort by making these children feel “useless” or “less worthy” than their peers. In such cases, I was asked to join some activities, read a book or, most often, look at the children’s artwork or listen to their stories. My decisions whether or not to submit to children’s pressure and give up planned observations were not formalized or motivated solely by the subjects’ emotional comfort, but they were also based on the belief that adult-assisted learning and interactions that involve the exchange of resources between the children’s world and the adult world are highly valuable. Acting on the assumption that children are capable of making decisions in matters that concern them, I also felt obliged to ensure that all preschoolers who had given their consent to participate in the study during the first meeting, who invited me to observe their activities and displayed an interest in my research work had the right to participate in the study. However, I was aware that some data collected upon the children’s “request” would have to be discarded in the analytical process. At the same time, the resulting knowledge about children and the mechanisms that drive their participation in social life could be invaluable for interpreting the results of my research.

### **3. The observer effect and the risk of data bias**

I was faced with yet another ethical dilemma as I became more involved in the life of the observed group of preschoolers: should I analyze the

data collected in situations that were, to a certain degree, orchestrated by me, but initiated by the children? By participating in the preschoolers' activities (mostly conversations), I co-created the space for peer learning; therefore, I induced the very phenomenon that I was researching: a phenomenon that, in principle, occurs naturally during spontaneous play. Qualitative research is not concerned with a researcher's influence on the research process or possible ways of eliminating that influence. However, the research methodology should account for the hypothetical assumption that an observer's perspective is always limited, and that an awareness of that limitation, including in laboratory studies, obliges the researcher to adopt a critical approach to his/her work at every stage of research, to examine the study's strengths and weaknesses, and to critically scrutinize the results (Malterud, 2001).

The involvement of the researcher arises from ensuing emotions, which may have various origin as well as identities, which in the case of the researcher become multiplied: research identity, resulting from the assumed research strategy and paradigm; professional identity and personal identity (that overlap). In particular situations one identity may seem more important than another and may be decisive as far as the choice, the level as well as degree of involvement on the part of the researcher are concerned (Chatman et al, 2005)<sup>2</sup>. From a subjective point of view, my relations with the subjects were mostly affected by my maternal experience (the need to protect children from unpleasantness from their peers) and professional experience as a kindergarten teacher (temptation for pedagogic intervention).

The problem how the researcher affected the studied setting also poses an ethical dilemma due to the risk of data bias, namely the collection and interpretation data that confirms a given position or the researcher's (unconscious) assumptions, which can undermine a study's reliability (cf. Grabski, 2009). The analysis of data collected in situations that are co-created by the researcher will be influenced by the scientist's (subjectively perceived) involvement in the observed events.

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<sup>2</sup> All listed types of identity are shaped by various human experiences. A turning point in the development of research identity may be, for example, reading a particular book, writing a thesis or attending methodological courses, a decision concerning employment, acquainted people and relations with them as well a change in marital status of a researcher (see Bernauer, 2012).

#### **4. The risk of negative reinforcement in research with children**

According to psychologists, participation in research creates a specific setting where children may not have adequate strategies for coping with the experienced problems. Therefore, events that are trivial for adults can be a source of considerable discomfort for children (Hornowska et al., 2014). The concept of risk, which is “commonly expressed as the magnitude of some harm multiplied by the probability of its occurrence” (Freedman et al., 2011, p. 225), cannot be completely eliminated from research, but it should be minimized. In the presented research, children were not exposed to considerable risk of harm also because the study was conducted in a formal setting, which is a protected environment where the educators are personally responsible for the children’s safety and are authorized to question the researcher’s competence and intentions. Observations of free play were the main data collection method, and they were conducted in a natural and typical preschool setting. The researcher did not resort to invasive procedures, and was minimally involved in the children’s and the educators’ activities. Therefore, the risk of harm was minimal, and it was reduced to “mere discomfort” (impatience, annoyance or boredom) that is not greater than that ordinarily encountered in daily life (Freedman et al., 2011). However, the above does not imply that the researcher should turn a blind eye to the children’s well-being during the study.

In human subject research, the well-being of participants should always take precedence over the research objectives, regardless of whether the results could generate benefits for a greater number of people (Nairn, Clark, 2012). The first ethical dilemmas that surfaced during my observations were concerned with the children’s emotional safety, although in the discussed cases, the relevant risks were not associated with preschoolers’ participation in the study, but with circumstances that are “ordinarily encountered in daily life” and remain beyond the researcher’s control. The dilemma was whether to remain a neutral observer (researcher) or to intervene with the aim of protecting the children from unpleasant experiences. The solution is seemingly simple because it stems from the roles and responsibilities of the adults who participate in preschoolers’ activities and lives. It is the teachers who are responsible for keeping the children safe during their daily activities in the kindergarten, and a teacher was always present during my observations. However, I developed close physical contact with preschoolers during the study, which enabled me to identify difficult situations and, potentially, quickly respond in a “pedagogically appropriate” manner. Most adults with



even minimal empathetic concern for others feel the need to protect children from discomfort, but also to reprimand them for undesirable behaviors. The situations in which children experienced strong negative emotions included conflict, bullying by peers, being excluded from play, or acts of physical aggression that were unnoticed by the teacher (sporadically). Such events provoked internal conflict because I had to reconcile my role of a researcher with that of a kindergarten teacher. My decision not to intervene in conflict situations was not prompted by the general necessity to remain neutral, but by an analysis of the likelihood of the children being harmed in a given situation. I based my approach on the work of Corsaro (1985) who argued that the experience of being excluded from a peer group is part of peer culture, and that it is an experience that children should be prepared for. Thus, the research process should account for the fact that any intervention in situations that could be potentially unpleasant for children, but which are part of recurring “social procedures” that are co-created in a peer culture, could be counterproductive in the long term. I also witnessed situations in which the children should have been, in my opinion, reprimanded for inappropriate behavior (swearing, physical aggression in conflict situations). However, I did not intervene, even though I was fully aware that an absence of criticism could reinforce negative behaviors. My decision was motivated by the fear of losing preschoolers’ trust as well as by the fact that any intervention could prompt the children to control their behavior in order to avoid my disapproval. In the process of winning the children’s trust, I was fully aware that as an adult, I had no formal control over my research participants. I have to add that most of the dilemmas resulting from my inability to reconcile the role of an impartial researcher with that of a sensitive educator were swiftly resolved by the teacher, particularly when the children displayed aggressive behaviors. There were seemingly trivial situations, to which I reacted without hesitation, when, for example, I handed children toy blocks from the upper shelf because the children asked for my help. The teacher instructed me that the children are not allowed to play with these toy blocks shortly before leaving kindergarten because collecting them afterwards is time-consuming and parents are reluctant to wait longer till children tidy the set. The following and the aforementioned situations left me with a feeling of uncertainty and inadequateness of my own behaviour. Despite the above, these events left me with a sense of uncertainty and personal inadequacy.

## **5. A researcher as a repository of knowledge in a given field of study**

The dilemma whether to remain a neutral observer or assume a different role in the explored context not only raises doubts as to whether the researcher should intervene in the educational process, but also leads to uncertainty regarding the researcher's relations with teachers, auxiliary personnel, parents and the management of the studied facility. During my research, in some cases a child was being bullied or mocked by his/her peers, which went unnoticed by the teacher. I did not intervene in such situations, which does not imply that I always remained a silent observer. The teachers never expected me to act as an "impartial judge" in such cases, but the emotions I had experienced as an observer influenced my attitude. In one of such situations, a teacher approached a bullied child that had started crying and asked him if everything was all right. Unprompted, I answered "It's not all right, the other boys are bullying him". The teacher talked to both boys, reminded them of their agreement on friendly play, and talked about the feelings of the bullied boy. This situation reflects on a researcher's emotions and their influence on the qualitative research process. My behavior did not affect the collected data, but it could have influenced the trust vested in me by the children. Perhaps, I had intervened unnecessarily, and the teacher would have correctly interpreted the boys' behavior and would have responded adequately without my "help". However, according to some sociologists, "the researcher is not merely an instrument to facilitate data collection. We can and do react" (Hubbard et al., 2001, p. 120). My response resulted from the fact that I had unwittingly abandoned a researcher's role and let the preschool teacher in me have a say in the matter. This and other social roles (of a mother or a university lecturer) have influenced my observations, mostly unintentionally, regarding not only the interactions between children, but also organizational matters and the management of space in the kindergarten, the methodical approaches used by kindergarten teachers, the parents' and the teachers' influence on the educational process, or staff relations. By becoming a repository of knowledge that could be of interest to others (parents, teachers, the kindergarten principal), I had to reflect on the significance of my observations. The remaining aspects of kindergarten life that I had analyzed during my "proper" research could, to a lesser or greater extent, have influenced the children's welfare and the effectiveness of the educational process.

Despite my own concerns, none of the pedagogic staff expected me to share my insights regarding the aspects of kindergarten work that was not

subject to the research. Preschoolers' parents, who clearly knew the reason of my presence at the establishment, did not speak to me either about the study, or the role of their children in it, and were satisfied with the information they obtained from me during our first meeting. Thus, I was saved the dilemma concerning the confidentiality of collected data.

However, the fact of experiencing anxieties illustrates that ethnographic researchers, in particular those dealing with vulnerable subjects such as children, should expect problems to which there are no easy procedural solutions. I did not reveal non-targeted observations concerning the functioning of the kindergarten as an institution, including observations of peer learning which constitute my prime scientific interest. I was bound by a verbal agreement with the kindergarten's management and teachers concerning my role in the study. The study was conducted in an open manner, and it focused on informal peer learning, whereas the remaining types of data were generally collected in situations where I had to abandon the research plan for neutral reasons. If the acquired knowledge were to be used to initiate a discussion about kindergarten services, the interested parties could conclude that my observations of the peer learning process were merely a pretext for criticizing the way the kindergarten was run. The collection of "accidental" data without the appropriate methodology could also undermine the study's reliability and could increase the risk of superficial and false results. Lastly, I resisted the temptation of disclosing the collected data in their entirety because I did not want to undermine the "gatekeepers" (Hammersley, Atkinson, 1995) who had provided me with access to the studied facility.

### **Conclusions**

The ethical dilemmas that I faced during the described research concerned the children's consent/assent to participate in the study, the researcher's involvement in the interactions between children and its consequences for the children's welfare and the reliability of the collected data, the need to protect children from harm, the confidential nature of the collected data, and the disclosure of information about the studied facility. Even though I was prepared to expect ethical "traps" and predict the circumstances under which such problems could occur, I was unable to "defuse the entire minefield". Problems appeared unexpectedly because the children's world never ceased to surprise me, forced me to play by its rules, put me to the test, and prompted me to confront ingrained habits with my present goals. In every difficult situation, I had to find the right balance between the role of a researcher and

other social roles. My were highly dependent on the context, and most solutions were developed *hic et nunc* because there were no general rules for dealing with a given situation. Critical reflection on the implemented solutions, the uncertainty whether the selected solution was appropriate or, in some cases, the conviction that some solutions were not appropriate, were not always helpful in other difficult situations. These experiences indicate that the knowledge of the relevant procedures and the decisions made by other investigators facing similar challenges can prepare researchers for dealing with ethical dilemmas in vulnerable settings, such as studies of children, but they cannot completely eliminate certain problems. I also believe that every solved problem provides me with new tools for conducting qualitative research, deepens my understanding of the studied site, the research subject and the dynamics of the research process, as well as the understanding of myself as a person and a researcher. In turn, a formal description of the problems encountered during research increases the weight of ethical dilemmas in research practice, shifts the discussion from an informal conversation to a scientific reflection, and prompts other researchers to exercise significant caution and exhibit sensitivity when treading on the “minefield” of qualitative research.

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## **„STĄPAJĄC PO POLU MINOWYM” – ETYCZNE DYLEMATY W BADANIACH Z UDZIAŁEM DZIECI**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia etyczne dylematy, przed jakimi może stanąć badacz jakościowy w trakcie badań z udziałem dzieci oraz możliwe sposoby ich rozstrzygnięcia. Mimo istnienia etycznych standardów w badaniach społecznych, eksploracja środowiska dziecięcego naraża na liczne wątpliwości i pułapki na tym polu. Omawiane problemy pojawiły się w toku etnograficznej obserwacji 5-latków, mającej na celu badanie przebiegu procesu uczenia się rówieśniczego dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym. Z perspektywy etyki omówiono następujące kwestie: świadomej zgody dzieci na udział w badaniach; ryzyka zbierania nieprzydatnego materiału badawczego; efektu badacza i niebezpieczeństwa formowania danych; zagrożenia wzmacniania negatywnych zachowań dzieci w toku obserwacji; poufności danych i wykorzystywania przez badacza wiedzy o badanym terenie. W artykule położono nacisk na dynamikę badań z udziałem dzieci, zależność podejmowanych decyzji etycznych od kontekstu oraz konieczność balansowania obserwatora między rolą badacza a innymi rolami społecznymi.

#### Słowa kluczowe:

etyka badań; uczenie się rówieśnicze, dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym, obserwacja; badania jakościowe.