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On, to, with, for, by: ethics and children in research

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ABSTRACT

The ethics of the participation of children in research have attracted the attention of childhood researchers for thirty years. By analysing central scholarly work in childhood sociology and in early childhood education research, the aim of this paper is to unfold, but also queer how ethics are articulated within literature that discusses children in research. Through the methodology of tracing-and-mapping, a map is constructed that displays how children in research are articulated in relation to the prepositions *on*, *to*, *with*, *for* and *by*. The map shows how these prepositions form a value scale, underpinned by certain philosophical assumptions about ethics. By relating this to a randomized control trial (RCT) study performed in Swedish preschools, the paper highlights the fact that it is not necessarily more ethical if the research is done *by* children, than *on* children. This contributes to a renewed and extended reflection on ethics, that thoroughly problematize a placing of research on a 'scale of ethics' – ranging from bad to good.

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Vignette: ethics and children in research

Three weeks after I defended my PhD thesis in Pedagogical Practices, I started working as a post-doctoral researcher in the first intervention randomized control trial (RCT) study in Swedish preschools. If my thesis had explored different ways of working with adolescents through postqualitative methodologies, this project involved standardized tests, brainwave recordings, observations and interviews, as well as explorative play-activities.¹ My role was to focus on the participating children, 4–6 yrs: What were their experiences of participating in this research project? What was it like to be a child in an RCT study? As a critical educational researcher, I was hesitant, especially in relation to test methodologies. The RCT study was questioned, from other educational researchers: 'Is this, at all, in line with a proper research ethics in early childhood education?' as one of the researchers within the project summarized the critique (Frankenberg 2018, 3 italics in original). I asked myself similar questions. Even if I understood that the research was specifically for children, what would happen to the children's agency? Wouldn't the tests and the observations turn the children into objects, where we as researchers performed research on them? Would the research be done to the children? Or maybe about them? Shouldn't we try to do research with the children, or together stage practices where the children became co-researchers and the research was – at least to some extent – done by the children? What about ethics?

Introduction

When addressing children in research, questions on ethics often become the center of attention. Thirty years have passed since the emergence of the new paradigm for the study of childhood

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(James and Prout 1990), in which a number of viewpoints emphasize childhood as a social construct and highlight how children's lives are worth studying in their own right. Regarding children as competent social actors has thus been viewed as crucial in order to address ethical issues in child research (Hopkins and Bell 2008, 3). Encouraging researchers to find pathways to produce knowledge on 'children's own perspectives on their everyday lives and experiences' (Christensen and James 2017), this has had major impact on the (social) sciences in general and on childhood studies in particular (James and Prout 2015, ix). Accordingly, numerous research papers, books, anthologies and handbooks have highlighted this subject matter (see for example Alderson 1995; Alderson and Morrow 2011; Christensen and James 2000, 2008, 2017; Kellett 2010; Källström and Bruck 2017; Palaiologou 2012).

The extensive literature might create the impression that childhood researchers have a rather homogeneous understanding of what constitutes properly ethical ways of working with children in research. However, there are interesting contradictions in the literature. Criticism has been raised that despite the insights from the new paradigm, ethical practices are not necessarily reflected in the work with children (see for example Broström 2012; Mayne and Howitt 2015; Powell and Smith 2009). Instead, it is argued that children are involved from a 'looking down' standpoint (Alanen 1998) that views childhood from an adult perspective in which children are being measured and evaluated through standardized tests, interviews or questionnaires (Smith 2011, 12). Similar results are shown in a meta-analysis of 506 research papers published between 2009 and 2012 on children in early childhood research: the vast majority of the papers (96,6%) position the children as non-participant objects or semi-participant subjects (Mayne and Howitt 2015). By starting from these contradictions, in the present paper I ask: Do the difficulties in 'putting ethics to work' mean that the majority of research that includes children is unethical? Should the RCT study I was engaged in per default be characterized as unethical in relation to the participating children? Following this, what underpinnings are taken for granted about ethics articulated in childhood literature?

By tracing-and-mapping dominating lines of thoughts, the aim of this paper is to unfold – but also queer – how ethics are articulated within literature that discusses children in research. Drawing on the work of Lenz Taguchi (2016a), Aronsson and Taguchi (2018) and Aronsson (2020), the methodology of tracing-and-mapping means that I will lay out a map of how different ways of describing children in research are underpinned by certain philosophical assumptions about ethics. The material for this 'mapping exercise' is not primarily empirical studies, but rather research papers, overviews, handbooks, and anthologies that discuss ethics in research with children broadly – from Christensen and James (2000), to Robson (2018) and Schulte (2020).

As the vignette shows, the tracing-and-mapping emerged through the curiosity and the necessity of knowing more about children in research and specifically in RCT studies. Elsewhere I have described how I investigated this through empirical engagements in which the children and I together created explorative play-activities, inspired by posthumanist and postqualitative theories and methodologies (see Bodén 2019). The tracing-and-mapping within this paper was performed alongside these activities, to produce a more complex picture of ethics in RCT studies and in my work with the children. To understand the context, the tracing-and-mappings were mainly centered around work in early childhood education research and in childhood sociology, as both of these areas have thoroughly discussed children's participation in research. As the tracing-and-mapping helped me question some of my own taken for granted ideas on ethics in research with children, they also evoked ways of queering dominant articulations in the literature. This becomes important for this special issue, in which a starting point is that new and inventive methodologies of the current research landscape call for new and inventive ways to tackle ethical questions. Through laying out the arguments and specificities of the previous literature alongside my own empirical engagement with children, I argue in the present paper that one way to tackle ethical questions is to trace-and-map how 'old' methodologies – like standardized tests, questionnaires or observations – are articulated as less sufficient to consider children as subjects and social actors, and to challenge this.

The remaining part of the paper will be organized as follows: in the upcoming section, I will introduce the methodology of tracing-and-mapping. A tracing-and-mapping is a double move, which highlights dominant articulations, while at the same time enabling creative experiments that draw new lines on the map. Accordingly, the subsequent section will outline the map that is constructed through my readings of previous literature, while focusing on the prepositions *on*, *to*, *with*, *for*, and *by*. Following this, I will elaborate on how these prepositions become articulated together with certain philosophical assumptions on ethics: *ethics as inclusion*; *ethics as fairness*; and *ethics as producing potential new worlds*. Through looking at these three assumptions, the overlaps, ambivalences, complexities and the entanglements of the prepositions will be acknowledged and scrutinized. The concluding section of the paper will highlight why the knowledge produced from this is important for childhood researchers addressing questions on ethics, as well as offer some propositions for researchers engaged in these questions.

A methodology of tracing-and-mapping

The methodology for investigating how ethics are articulated in research involving children is inspired by what Lenz Taguchi (2016a) describes as the double movement of *tracing-and-mapping*. The methodology of tracing-and-mapping focuses on extracting specific concepts, problems or events from the 'chaos of multiple realities' (Lenz Taguchi 2016a, 214), while at the same time 'setting up and creating new events, possibilities, problems and concepts for a reality to come' (Lenz Taguchi 2016a, 214). Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994), the double move of tracing-and-mapping could thus go beyond mere criticism, to perform a critical tracing of dominant articulations while simultaneously mapping new lines through the experimental process of mapping (Lenz Taguchi 2016b, 39). Nevertheless, tracing the dominant articulations is as important as experimenting with the articulations. Here I am in alignment with Aronsson (2019, 36) who stresses that without acknowledging the arguments that underpin and support a dominant articulation, the tracing-and-mapping is at risk of creating a map without context or history. It is not about creating a representation, but rather acknowledging that without the tracing it becomes problematic to grasp *of* or *from* what the transformation emerges. Nonetheless, the tracing of the dominant articulations is only a temporary capture. The constructed map will show how different articulations are intersecting, connecting, reinforcing each other, as well as producing differences (Lenz Taguchi and Palmer 2014). Thus, the tracing-and-mapping is an entangled endeavour, in which dominant articulations are identified in the same movement in which they are transformed (Aronsson 2019, 33; see also Johansson 2015). This will be done by putting the tracings 'back on the map at a different entry point' (Lenz Taguchi 2016b, 41), which will invite new lines of articulations and new ways of articulating these lines.

In this paper, the tracing-and-mapping meant that a map was constructed through my readings and re-readings of scholarly work that discusses ethics in research with children. In the following, I will outline how this methodology was enacted. The paper maintains that the unavoidable selection of literature does not need to be thought of as a delimitation but rather as a point of departure; a point of departure that opens up for yet other studies and other lines of thinking (see also Aronsson 2019, 55). By following the articulations within a specific study, this becomes a way of 'literally starting anywhere – *in the middle*' (Lenz Taguchi 2013, 712 italics in original) when doing the selection of literature. The special issue of which this paper is part emerged as a response to Robson's (2018) call for a continued reflection on ethical research with and for children and young people in *Children's Geographies*. Hence, the first point of departure occurs in the middle of Robson's paper. Among other things, Robson points to the importance of a special issue of *Children's Geographies* from 2008 on 'Interdisciplinary perspectives: ethical issues and child research', edited by Hopkins and Bell (2008). Thus, Robson (2018) led to Hopkins and Bell (2008, 1), who in turn refer to two 'landmark special issues about the ethical issues involved in doing research with children and young people [that] occurred in 1996 and 2001 (*Children and Society* 1996, *Ethics, Place and Environment*

2001)'. In order to also engage with the extensive publication of edited volumes and handbooks on children in research, I concurrently started with the three editions of *Research with Children*, by Christensen and James (2000, 2008, 2017) and *Rethinking Children and Research*, by Kellett (2010). I read the papers and books thoroughly, while paying specific attention to when, how, why, and where ethics were discussed, and I also scrutinized the reference lists to look for new paths to follow. These led to engaging with other papers and books in early childhood education research and in childhood sociology.

In total, I worked with approximately fifty research papers and twenty books. This means that the majority of the papers and books are not referenced in this paper, but have nonetheless been crucial for how the map is constructed. Early on in the readings, different prepositions started to catch my attention, as will be described below. Even if the 'mapping exercise' could be described as already in motion when reading the first sentence of Robson's (2018) paper, the prepositions guided my reading, and I followed the lines of thoughts connected to each preposition. I did not draw or create an actual map, but the map emerged in writing long summaries of each preposition, filled with quotes from the papers and books and also my own reflections. When each preposition seemed as carefully and comprehensively described as possible, I asked 'How does this particular preposition articulate ethics?'. Through doing this, I paid specific attention to lines of thinking that seemed to extend beyond merely one preposition. By connecting the text written about one preposition with text written about another preposition, some lines of thought thickened and became more striated, eventually turning into dominating articulations. Through these thick lines, I laid out three different philosophical assumptions about ethics on the map, which seemed to underpin the papers and the books. As the reader will soon realize, ethics were articulated in such different – and related – terms as *inclusion*, *fairness*, and *producing potential new worlds*. The tracing-and-mapping also calls for ways of creating new lines of thoughts and paths that move beyond the dominant articulations. This meant that the unfoldings of *ethics as inclusions*, *ethics as fairness* and *ethics as producing potential new worlds* also served as productive and generative endeavours to queer notions about both 'old' and 'new and inventive' methodologies. The constructed map will thus simultaneously be created and also transformed, as will be shown in the following.

Tracing-and-mapping the ethics of children in research

In the following, the map I constructed of the dominant articulations in previous literature on children in research will be outlined. I will at first discuss how articulations within the literature seem to produce a 'scale of ethics'. Thereafter, in the next section, I will trace the philosophical assumptions about ethics underpinning these articulations. Subsequently – through relating the literature to the RCT study I worked in – I will show how the tracing-and-mapping models the dominant articulations, enabling a remapping of the scale and a rescaling of the map.

Ethics on a scale of prepositions

When reading literature discussing children in research, there seems to be a taken for granted notion that the *position* and positioning of the child is closely connected to ethics (Kellett 2005, 2010; Thomas 2017; Christensen and James 2000, 2008, 2017). As such, it is emphasized how researchers within early childhood education research and childhood sociology for a number of years have sought to challenge objectifying practices by instead doing 'research with children, where children's opinions and views are sought' (Einarsdóttir 2007, 198). However, when laying out this notion on the created map it becomes apparent how the articulations focusing on positions are allied with certain spatial or temporal definitions.

When discussing the first edition of their ground-breaking anthology *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* from 2000, Christensen and James (2017, 1 italics in original) emphasize how 'the focus was on research *with*, rather than *on*, children, in a desire to position children as

social actors who are subjects, rather than objects of enquiry'. The focus was thus on a shift from 'research "on" children to research "with" children and ultimately widening this focus to include research "by" children' (Kellett 2010, 6f.). When this is related to different research methodologies, the map displays methodologies positioning the children as objects – like a standardized test – as conducted *on* children; methodologies positioning the children as subjects – such as interviews or participatory action research – as conducted *with* children; and newer innovative methodologies positioning children as co-researchers as done *by* children (Christensen and James 2000, 2008, 2017; Clavering and McLaughlin 2010; Kellett 2010; Mayne and Howitt 2015; Thomas 2017; Schulte 2020). Furthermore, research could be done about (Kellett 2010, 86), or *to* children. Or *for* them, focusing on the benefits of the research (Alderson and Morrow 2011). Through the tracing, a map is thus constructed that does not only consist of positions, but also prepositions like *on*, *to*, *with*, *for* and *by*.

When the prepositions are discussed, some recurring lines of thought seem to be embedded in the literature. For example, an iterative articulation states that research involving children should be done *for* children to be able to contribute to the better life outcomes of children (Powell et al. 2011). Simultaneously, it is argued that it is more likely that children are treated as subjects or social actors if the research is performed *with* or *by* children, and more likely that they are treated as objects if the research is performed *on* them (Christensen and James 2017; Clavering and McLaughlin 2010; Kellett 2005; 2010; Mayne and Howitt 2015). Doing research *with*, rather than *on*, children is even compared to a paradigm shift, where the next step is research done *by* children (Thomas 2017, 160). Furthermore, research *to* or about children is outlined as problematic, but not as questionable as research *on* children (Kellett 2010). As the prepositions are converged with the lines of thoughts articulating the importance of the involvement of children in research, a dominating enunciation emerges: the more involved the children are in shaping the research – the closer the research is to be done *with* or *by* children – the greater the chance for an ethical research practice.

From this, I argue that one of the things that emerges on the constructed map is a scale. But not the scale that one might expect from a map, i.e. a scale that shows the relationship between a distance on the map to a corresponding distance on the ground. Instead, the scale that emerges is a gradually progressing 'scale of ethics', related to the different prepositions. The prepositions almost become a linear rhyme where the counting goes *on*, *to*, *with*, *for*, *by* instead of one, two, three four, five.

To discuss children in research through highlighting *on*, *to*, *with*, *for* and *by* is not new, and related analyses have been articulated elsewhere (see for example Clavering and McLaughlin 2010; Gibbs et al. 2013; Kellett 2010; Mayne and Howitt 2015). Rather than a scale, Clavering and McLaughlin (2010, 604) describe it as a continuum: 'from research done on children, to that which is carried out with children, and finally that which is by children'. Through the eight rungs on 'the ladder of participation', Hart (1992) describes similar thoughts. It is thus important to stress that the mapping-and-tracing process identifies the 'scale of ethics' as a value scale that 'measure[s] or contrast[s] "goods" and "bads"' (to follow Law's and Mol's [2002, 84] discussion of scales). Research *on* children is at one end of the scale (the 'bad' end) and research *by* children is on the other (the 'good' end). In a similar vein, just as 'many people have chosen to use the ladder [of participation] as a comprehensive tool for measuring their work with children rather than as a jumping-off point for their own reflections' (Hart 2008, 19), the scale thus becomes prescriptive rather than descriptive: research should be as close to the end of the 'scale' as possible.

The ethical underpinnings of the prepositions

In the following I will unfold the philosophical assumptions about ethics that underpin the scale.

Ethics as inclusion

As outlined above, the preposition *on* has been thoroughly criticized by scholars focusing on ethics. The level of participation on behalf of the children is generally described as low or even non-

existent. Kellett (2010, 84 italics in original) states that power relations between researcher and children are at their most visible in research on children, and even claims that:

Some would argue that the relationship between researcher and researched in some circumstances is nothing short of abusive, where adults use their absolute power over children to perpetrate cruel and damaging research *on* children.

Mayne and Howitt (2015) describe how this way of doing research only includes the participating children in superficial and non-participatory ways. The concluding sentence of the introduction to *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* (Christensen and James 2000, 7) serves as another example of this:

Only through listening and hearing what children say and paying attention to the ways in which they communicate with us will progress be made towards conducting research with, rather than simply on, children.

While the introduction is somewhat rewritten in the third edition of *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* (Christensen and James 2017, 9) the tracing-and-mapping shows that this concluding sentence remains the same, displaying how this articulation is still made relevant. In this quote, *listening*, *hearing* and *paying attention* are produced as methodological means for enabling ethical research *with* children. Research *with* is articulated as something to strive towards – a *progress* from *on* to *with*. The use of the word *us* produces the reader as a potential we – ‘we as researchers’ – that should agree upon the fact that this progress is necessary. The dominant articulation that research *on* children is problematic, converges with and is reinforced by the equally strong articulation that doing research *with* children is preferable.

At the same time, the constructed map of converging lines of articulations shows that the preposition *on* emanates together with a critique of the preposition *to* – that is, doing research *to* or *about* children. When discussing individual interviews and focus group discussions, Pells (2010, 198) quotes a child who says ‘They come, talk with us, leave, then we never hear from them again’. Thus, the research is mainly described as being performed for the researcher – through test methodologies or ethnographic methodologies or interviews (Pells 2010). The relationship between children and researchers has to build on trust as the researcher needs something from the children, but is not necessarily going to give something back (Kellett 2010, 86). Accordingly, doing research *to* or *about* children is articulated as harbouring problematic power relations between children and researchers, but is not as extreme as when research is done *on* children (*ibid*).

When laying out the critique of doing research *on* or *to* children on the map, the tracing-and-mapping shows that ethics are defined by way of acknowledging the children as subjects and social actors capable of speaking for themselves. Adults cannot fully understand the worlds of children, and thus need children to explain it to them (Christensen and James 2017), and the role of the researcher is that of enabling this, together with the children, by opening up possibilities for involving children in the research process (Kim 2016; Prout 2002; Roberts 2017; Willumsen, Hugaas, and Studsrød 2014). Accordingly, I argue that these articulations could be traced to the philosophical assumption of what I call ‘*ethics as inclusion*’.

The critique of research *on* children builds on the assumption that this preposition neglects the possibilities of engaging in close and inclusive collaborations *with* the children. This means that the dominant articulations describing research *on* children as problematic – or at the ‘bad’ end of the scale – departs from the philosophical assumptions about ethics that underpins research *with* children. Accordingly, the critique of research *on* children is mainly concerned with what this research *does not* do or what it *is not*: it does not include the children in the research process, but excludes them; it does not recognize the complexities of childhood and the complexities of doing research that involves children; and does not acknowledge the agency of the children, but turns them into objects for adults, whether for the researcher or for the research. Furthermore, the map shows that research *on* children is not something that is used as a definition of someone’s own work, but rather is ascribed to other researchers, to other disciplines or to ancient times (Christensen

and James 2017; Kellett 2010; Schulte 2020; Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). The critique thus emerges from one realm, and is transferred to another realm that might have other philosophical assumptions about ethics. To problematize this, we have to look at the philosophical assumptions about ethics that underpins research *on* children.

Ethics as fairness

Within the literature, there are few articulations that address what research *on* children is or how it is enacted in practice, i.e. what research methodologies that are put to work or how ethics are addressed. However, short descriptions or subordinate clauses give some clues. Kellett (2010, 12) describes how research *on* children was born out of an interest in child health and wellbeing and that a major part of the research has been performed as observational studies of children's development, using large-scale quantitative methods. On the map, this research is described as something that has historically dominated the field, and that much has been learned about children and childhood through this even if the level of children's participation happens to be limited in this research (Clavering and McLaughlin 2010; Mayne and Howitt 2015). To relate this to ethics, Frankenberg (2018, 8) describes how research that departs from developmental perspectives on children, and with knowledge claims focusing on effects and generalizability, emphasizes an ethics of fairness. Thus, the research is articulated as performed *on* children, but when this articulation is ruptured by the preposition *for*, new and interesting lines of thought arise.

The preposition *for* is primarily associated with the enhancement of children's life through research, and will inevitably open up discussions on the 'harm versus benefits dilemma'. The literature emphasizes how this evokes ethical tensions between the goals of the researcher and the goals of the participants and on whose interests should be put first: the participating children; children in general; the interests of society; of parents; of the researcher or of the research (Alderson and Morrow 2011; Guillemain and Gillam 2004). Canosa, Graham, and Wilson (2018) describes how discussions on harm often dwell upon the 'here and now' of the research in relation to the participating individual children, while discussions on benefits more often focus on children as a social group and in future gains for society. When research *for* children is related to research *on* children and laid out on the map, ethics is primarily articulated through focusing on the benefits of the research *for* children in a future-oriented view and on a general level, where social justice and equal opportunities to welfare are some of the primary goals (compare with Frankenberg 2018). Accordingly, these articulations could be traced to the philosophical assumption of what I have come to refer to as '*ethics as fairness*'.

When outlining research *on* children as underpinned by a future-oriented *ethics as fairness*, one could argue that research *on* children is not 'bad' or unethical per se. Rather, it is a question of from whence the critique emanates. The empirical material for the tracing-and-mapping is mainly literature from the fields of early childhood education research and childhood sociology, strongly influenced by the new paradigm for the study of childhood. As such, it is no surprise that *ethics as inclusion* is the philosophical assumption that underpins most of the articulations on the map, including when it comes to articulating where research *on* children should be placed on the 'scale of ethics'. Nevertheless, if research *on* children is instead understood as underpinned by *ethics as fairness*, which primarily strives for future gains of children in general, rather than encountering with the participating children 'there and then' it might be as ethical – or as unethical – as the other prepositions.

Ethics as producing potential new worlds

When laying out the preposition on the constructed map, *by* is placed at the very end of the scale. The basic principle of research *by* children is that the control of the adult researcher is reduced, enabling children to have roles as researchers themselves (Clavering and McLaughlin 2010, 607). The preposition *by* is mainly used to describe research practices in which the children are regarded as the main investigators, involved in shaping all parts of the process by setting the agenda: from the

identification of a research problem, to the presentation of the results (Kim 2016; Clavering and McLaughlin 2010). This means that research *by* children often goes hand-in-hand with viewing children as ‘co-researchers’ (Mayne and Howitt 2015), with a focus on how research could acknowledge the agency of children, as well as improve their situation (Esser et al. 2016). In the case of the preposition *by*, the child-oriented focus has informed and shaped the research, making it possible for children to affect research *about* them (Thomas and O’Kane 1998). The idea of ‘researching’ as ‘a co-researcher who helps to produce and analyse data and validate research reports’, (Alderson 2001, 139) is an analogy to how feminists have argued for empowering research *for* and *by* women, not only *about* them (Rosen and Twamley 2018).² Spyrou (2018, 162) describes how, among childhood researchers, research *by* children has even been thought of as ‘the most empowering from among participatory approaches to research and the one which respects and promotes children’s rights the most’.

Thomas (2017, 175) highlights how it could be argued that children perform research all the time, when testing and exploring what is possible in both the social and the physical world. This situatedness and partiality is articulated as one of the benefits of research *by* children (Smith, Monaghan, and Broad 2002). As such, research *by* children is often connected to new research approaches, where traditional humanist frameworks are problematized. Instead it is emphasised that ‘the child is not a separate entity but formed from and with its material environment and with the non-human’ (Robinson and Osgood 2019, 51). These approaches are often informed by feminist new materialist or posthumanist frameworks (see for example Schulte 2020; Murriss 2016; Osgood and Robinson 2019; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2018). The focus is to ‘highlight more nuanced accounts of children’s worlds which reflect both the messiness and complexity of their lives in general and their participation in research in particular’ (Spyrou 2018, 8). Within these frameworks, agency is not viewed as being placed within an individual child, but rather something that emerges in *relations* – human as well as non-human (Esser et al. 2016; Murriss 2016). Through this, ethics becomes articulated as acknowledging the relationality and the situatedness of the participating children, while at the same time showing that the knowledge produced will be radically dependent on how the research apparatus is set up. As such, this parallels the idea in feminist arguments that ‘research methodologies and practices are necessarily political and ethical activities’ (Coleman and Osgood 2019, 63).

In these articulations, the concept of *care* becomes especially significant. Even though an ‘ethics of care’ sometimes primarily focuses on human relations (see for example Wihstutz 2016), Cockburn (2005) emphasizes that an ethics of care highlights the relational character of children’s social lives, thus putting in the foreground *context and relationality* rather than abstract and universal rights (see also Spyrou 2018). In this sense, an ethics of care shifts the focus to children’s relationships with both living and non-living companions, as well as to the critical and ethico-political dimensions and effects of these relations (Hohti and Osgood 2020). Following the work of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), this is described in terms of ‘world-making practices’ in which care becomes something that ‘engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands on agencies of practical material consequence’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; 4 as cited in Coleman and Osgood 2019, 63).

In the posthumanist framework, care is thus closely connected to a desire for enabling new realities through the research, and as such the research is understood as a world-producing practice. Thus, this way of describing the work with children is ‘based on a vision of social justice as critical, respectful and life-enhancing’ (Giugni 2011, 12), where ethics is about enabling a multiplicity of realities to emerge, in close collaboration with the participating children (Bodén 2019; Trafiprats 2020). Accordingly, I argue that the articulations on research *by* children can be traced to the philosophical assumption of *ethics as producing potential new worlds*. This assumption stresses that ethical concerns are always an integral part of a research process, because values are an integral part of knowing, being, choosing and producing research (see further Barad 2007). The posthumanist underpinnings thus form research problems that demand the research to be done with children

as active participants. Not as the only participants with agency, but in relations with active materials (Kind 2020).

Through tracing-and-mapping the philosophical assumptions underpinning the articulations within the literature of focus, it has been shown that the prepositions are not as distinct and separate as first imagined. This will be further developed below.

Remapping the scale and rescaling the map

In the previous section, it is apparent that the prepositions continually diverge with, and inform, each other. Relating the scale and the different philosophical assumptions about ethics to my work within the RCT study, will further rupture and displace the meaning of the dominating lines of articulation.

In the study in which I participated, two pedagogical interventions were evaluated: explorative learning-processes in smaller groups of children, and individual learning with a program on a digital tablet. Furthermore, a group was randomly assigned as the control group that performed 'business as usual'. In line with the RCT design, pre- and post-tests were performed to study the effects of the interventions. Thus, all 432 children participated in a handful of standardized language, communication, cognitive, socio-emotional, and early mathematic tests. A randomized group of 139 children also participated in a selective attention experiment where brainwaves/EEG were measured and recorded (Gerholm et al. 2018, 5; see also Frankenberg et al. 2019; Gerholm et al. 2019).

To learn more about the articulations on ethics in studies similar to the study I was working in, the tracing-and-mapping took me to a number of studies that engage with children through RCT methodologies. Starting in the middle of the articulations within these studies, the tracing-and-mapping shows how the studies are mainly focused on the outcome of the interventions (see for example Haley et al. 2017; Jensen, Holm, and Bremberg 2013) or the experiences of adults (see for example Raver et al. 2008), while the perspectives of the children on being part of these projects are seldom or never addressed. On the map, there were almost no children to be found, as they seemed to be stuck somewhere in the background, described through figures and numbers. In relation to the scale, these studies would be characterized as research *on* children, and as such less interested in the participating children themselves. However, when these studies were read through an *ethics of fairness*, there *were* children to be found, but not the children of the 'there and then' of the study. This becomes evident when looking closer at the research problems that guide some of these studies – the improvement of language for children with poor oral skills (Haley et al. 2017); the evaluation of programs for an enhancement of physical activity in preschools (De Bock et al. 2013); measuring the effects of a method for improving preschool quality for children in general and for children from disadvantaged families (Jensen, Holm, and Bremberg 2013); and to 'improve teachers' and their emotionally supportive classroom practices' (Raver et al. 2008, 10). The articulations on children are focused on future outcomes, that might affect all children.

What also emerged in the articulations – or rather what was missing – was a discussion on ethics. In these studies, *ethics as fairness* is often so taken for granted that it is not explicitly stated as an ethical stance. Instead, ethics were described through sentences like: 'Informed written consent was obtained from the parents of all participating children' (De Bock et al. 2013, 65) and 'Prior to the commencement of the study, university ethics approval was gained' (Neumann 2018, 242). Accordingly, these studies articulate another aspect of ethics that I have not discussed so far, but is an important line of thought on the map: ethics as standardized guidelines connected to committees and institutional review boards (IRB). Articulations about 'standardized ethics' can be traced in the literature discussing children in research in general. According to Robson (2018), formal ethical approval is routinely asked of publications in biomedical journals, but has become more common within the social sciences. Focus is usually on informed consent (mainly from caregivers),

confidentiality, storing of the empirical material and so on. Skelton (2008, 23) describes how committees have been important for ensuring ‘good ethical research’, but stress that the guidelines have usually not emerged from child centered perspectives. In line with this, Robson (2018) claims that research within the social sciences could not blindly follow the ethical guidelines of medical research, and stresses that ethics through IRB approval could turn into a box-ticking, that makes elaborated discussions on ethics difficult.

These few studies are of course not a representation of all RCT studies that engage with children. Nonetheless, when the missing children and the missing ethics of the RCT papers are placed at a different entry point on the map, and related to the intervention study of which I was a part, the understanding of the articulations becomes more complex. Within the interdisciplinary research team of the RCT study, disagreements and conflicts arose because of a strong resistance towards the testing of individual children (Frankenberg et al. 2019). We *were* literally doing research *on* children, when we as part of the pre- and post-tests were placing small EEG caps, covered with electrodes connected to cords, connected to a computer, *on* the heads of the children (see further Gerholm et al. 2019). To cope with what some of us were hesitant about, we agreed upon some basics: mere consent from guardians could never be enough. The ethics had to start with the participating children themselves (Frankenberg et al. 2019). This meant that one of the first things we introduced to the children was the ‘stop hand’ (see Kendall-Taylor, Erard, and Haydon 2013) to help them steer their own participation, enabling an in-situ consent; we also prepared a book and a video about the testing. Furthermore, we conducted child-interviews to produce knowledge about how they experienced being participants in RCT research themselves, and I found myself making EEG hats of gauze bandage, pipe cleansers and sequins together with the children in explorative play-activities to produce new knowledge on their experiences of wearing them (Bodén 2019).

Through highlighting the participation of children in ‘micro-ethical moments’ – similar to all the ongoing negotiations that happened within the project – Graham, Powell, and Truscott (2016, 83) claim that the development of more participatory methods could provide benefits for both the children as part of a study and for children more broadly considered; in other and in future studies, entangling the preposition of *with* and *for*. The discussions, conflicts and agreements within the research team, meant that our application for ethical vetting³ covered 48 pages. Nonetheless, when these discussions were transformed into publications – especially the papers outlining the results of the study – the discussion between the children and the researchers on when and where to participate; when being filmed and being interviewed; whether or not to do the tests or participate in the play-activities, etc. got lost in transformation, condensed in five sentences under the heading ‘Ethics approval and consent to participate’ (Gerholm et al. 2019, 25). The only paper in which these ethical considerations have made it into print so far is the paper where we outline the ups and downs of working in an interdisciplinary project (see Frankenberg et al. 2019), hiding that doing research *on* children was inevitably intertwined with practices of *with*, underpinned by an *ethics as inclusion* as well as an *ethics of fairness*.

When placing the preposition *on* at new points on the map, interesting inclinations happen to the ‘scale of ethics’. The same can be said about my collaboration with the children. The making of hats, for instance, could be thought of as research done *by* children, where I tried to work with the children as ‘co-researchers’. These collaborations were focused on acknowledging the worlding processes of our explorations, and our joint possibilities of producing new realities and new ways of being part of the RCT study (Bodén 2019, 275). The practices we performed – engaging in creative materials, without any other instructions than ‘explore as you wish!’ – were very similar to everyday activities in Swedish preschools (see further Lenz Taguchi 2010; Palmer 2016). Tracing our work, *ethics as producing potential new worlds* clearly underpinned it. However, it could be argued that the free reins and the play-like activities we produced together made it difficult for the children to know what was expected of them, and maybe above all, be aware that they were part of my post-doctoral research project (see further Bodén 2019). In a way, the explorative activities I performed with the children might be understood even more as research *on* children that turning them into objects for

research. The power relations between us were hidden, as I became someone to play and explore with, without it always being obvious that I was also there to produce knowledge. In the structured practices of the testing, the children – through the well-prepared ethics protocol and ongoing discussions – had greater possibilities of participating on informed terms, creating another type of inclusion altogether. Queering the articulation of research *by* children thus shows that ethics as standardized guidelines and ‘box-tickings’ could be something else. Rather than an ‘exemption warrant’ that hides the complexities of working with children, the standardized guidelines could also become a way to include children in the research on a transparent note, where power relations become more visible and therefore easier to challenge.

Concluding discussion: ontowithforby

When ending this paper, I want to return to the questions with which we began: Do the difficulties in ‘putting ethics to work’ mean that the majority of research that includes children is unethical? Was the RCT study I was engaged in per default unethical in relation to the participating children? What are the taken for granted underpinnings about ethics articulated in literature discussing children in research?

The tracing-and-mapping of dominating lines of thought within literature that discusses children in research makes visible a ‘scale of ethics’. However, by highlighting the philosophical assumptions of *ethics as inclusion*, *ethics as fairness* and *ethics as producing potential new worlds* and relating these to the RCT study, the scale and its inherent logic is queered. Preconceived assumptions that RCT studies are necessarily unethical and should be placed at the ‘bad’ end of the scale are challenged, and likewise the assumptions that qualitative and participatory practice are ‘good’ and more ethical. Rather than claiming that ethical practices are not necessarily reflected in the actual work with children (see for example Broström 2012; Mayne and Howitt 2015; Powell and Smith 2009), the tracing-and-mapping shows that when previous literature on children in research converge and is read through the RCT study and through processes of doing research with children, the scale from *on* to *by* seems inefficient. Through what is shown on the constructed map, the scale is thus radically questioned and becomes an ‘ontowithforby’ or a ‘boytwothirnof’; messy and mixed together, living and dynamic, changing and evolving. As such, it might not be enough to simply remap that scale or rescale the map, but rather to resist such a practice of placing research on a scale entirely.

The laying out of the map thus unfolds – and queers – how scholarly work on children in research is underpinned by assumptions on *ethics as inclusion*, *ethics as fairness* and *ethics as producing potential new worlds*. In this concluding part, I would like to take the opportunity to engage with the politics of the critique offered in the paper by drawing on these three lenses. Without being prescriptive, the ambition here is to challenge readers to direct the questioning and queering to their own research and their own assumptions.

The often restrictive conditions of academic publishing, in which authors are asked to reduce discussions on ethics due to tight word limits (Robson 2018), undoubtedly constrain careful dialogues. This might in turn have consequences regarding how much effort is actually put into discussions on ethics in research projects. Thus, my first proposition follows Robson’s (2018, 477) suggestion to be open to possibilities for elaborate discussions on ethics in more publications, by including digital links to additional details on ethics. These discussions could make evident an awareness of the assumptions about ethics that is taken for granted in research projects working with children; assumptions that are so embedded and embodied in research (and in researchers!) that they become invisible. Furthermore, the fact that researchers would have the opportunity to highlight and examine what kind of assumptions about ethics they rely on – inclusion, fairness, world-producing practices, or maybe something extending beyond these lenses – would hopefully open up a pathway toward more nuanced readings and more affirmative critique.

This leads us to my second proposition, which has already been hinted at in the tracing-and-mapping above. When criticizing or problematizing a methodology or a specific research project (or placing it at either end of the scale), I am emphasizing an intervention from within. That is, I argue that we should be careful not to transfer critique from a realm that might draw on some specific assumption on ethics, to a realm that might draw on some other assumptions. However, this does not mean that anything goes. Rather, it means that we have to find paths beyond the dominant articulations inherent in a scale from *on* to *by* and be precise and fair in our critique. Will the challenge be to understand ethics as something that emerges in specific contexts and not pre-defined as good or bad?

My third and final proposition suggests an approach in which the opposition between ‘older and outdated’ methodologies and ‘new and inventive’ ones is questioned and they are reviewed as *potentially* equally ethical. One way to do this is by initiating (multidisciplinary) collaborations with colleagues. Another way is to stress that researchers working with children might have to engage with – rather than merely critique – the things they feel most hesitant about, whether it be RCT methodologies, or something else. These unexpected collaborations or engagements could contribute to other discussions on ethics and on children in research; discussions that challenge both ‘older and outdated’ methodologies and ‘new and inventive’ ones. An openness to the unexpected does not have to entail an avoidance of standardized guidelines. An interest in ‘micro-ethical’ events does not mean that it is impossible to have an interest in future gains for children in general. This means that it is equally important to highlight how a specific research project contributes to an *ethics of fairness*, to an *ethics of inclusion* and to an *ethics of producing potential new worlds*. What I call for is thus *multiethical* perspectives, where different ethical underpinnings could be laid out beside each other to strengthen a research project and also be a research project *for* children, one that engages the norms, values and ethical doings of children – the children that the research concerns foremost and the children indispensable for the research to be performed at all.

Notes

1. For more information on the project, see Bodén (2019), Frankenberg et al. (2019), Gerholm et al. (2019) and Gerholm et al. (2018).
2. See also Wall’s (2019) discussion on childism as an analogy to feminism.
3. The Regional Ethics Board DNR nr: 2015/1664–31/5.

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