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The child perspective or the children's perspective? A choice with implications for researchers and policy-makers alike

At this workshop I would like to problematise the question of the children's perspective as a scholarly term much used in recent child research – a field that has expanded rapidly since the 1990s – as against the child perspective as used by organisations that work with children or that determine policy. Both the scholarly and the institutional variants can be said to have grown out of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and both reflect its conviction that children are a special social group, but equally it is obvious that they have diverged considerably since.

At the heart of recent research on children – sometimes called childhood studies, or new social studies of childhood – we find the notion that society is organised by age and, in terms of social structure, children are subordinate to adults and have an experience of society that is rarely paid much note. They are a 'muted group'. The main focus of this brand of research is the children's situation as it presents itself in a variety of social arenas, and by extension the children's experiences of society; the general ambition is to develop an appropriate theoretical framework that is the equivalent of existing theories of gender, class, and ethnicity.

Initially, research pursued in this field was said to apply a child perspective, a term also much used when hammering out research policy. Research on children has traditionally been pursued under the aegis of disciplines such as pedagogy, psychology, and social work. The focus has naturally fallen on the organisations and professional groups with which the academic disciplines already have strong ties. For example, children have been studied with a view to improving treatment strategies, intervention programmes, and pedagogical and didactic methods. Yet in these contexts children themselves have had few opportunities to formulate their own – alternative – research needs.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has had an increasing impact on legislation and policy, and on organisations working with children. Asylum-seeking children, and above all unaccompanied children, form a group whose social circumstances are dictated by the interplay of abstract Convention and institutional reality. A child perspective, in the sense of the UN Convention, often revolves around two elements: the best interests of the child; and the views of the child. The best interests of the child means that adults should investigate, formulate, and take decisions that offer children protection, care, and fair treatment. The views of the child means that adults should solicit – and respect – the child's views when taking decisions, albeit to an extent 'appropriate to the child's level of maturity'. This child perspective is thus something quite different from the scholarly perspective that turns on the pursuit of knowledge, of which the first equivalent to spring to mind is analytical gender research, for example.

The prominence given the child perspective by various organisations has aroused the interest of child researchers. There are now a number of studies, national and international, that have

systematically analysed the child perspective employed by a variety of organisations in the light of a *scholarly* child perspective. In these circumstances it became necessary to come up with a new term to distinguish the scholarly perspective: terms currently in circulation are, for example, 'the children's standpoint' (which refers to a theoretical perspective) and 'the children's perspective' (which refers to children's own experiences), the latter implying that actual children have participated in the research process. This branch of institutional research also embraces analytical studies of the UN Convention that, for example, have looked at how children's subordinate position is reproduced in formulations such as 'the child's level of maturity' – the more *adult* a child becomes – that reveal a firmly held belief that adulthood is the norm.

Alongside this, there have been a series of studies of how the child perspective is applied in a variety of measures that affect children. Generally it can be said that the child perspective seems to have been of little consequence compared with the main goals set for the implementation of, say, a restrictive asylum policy. What numerous studies *have* shown is just how many organisations spend a great deal of time and effort on framing the rhetorical and ideological presentation of their operations as being consistent with a child perspective, which has resulted in some very flexible interpretations of the UN Convention. A series of researchers have underscored the point that this is partly a consequence of the vagueness of the Convention itself.

When it comes to asylum-seeking children, it ought to be fairly simple, for example, to take into account the children's perspectives, given that their views and their best interests converge on the same point – that they should remain – because the situation is so much worse in their homelands (and, moreover, their views on their own best interests are shared by so many other refugees). When designing child research, it becomes a matter of showing how when viewed through the prism of society, personal worries expressed by a child, for example by asking for asylum, become a structural issue linked to a specific asylum policy.

In terms of the various organisations a child will encounter in the course of the asylum process, it is reasonable to assume that, like other branches of child studies, researchers will find that the child perspective is used to resolve a variety of distinct problems that otherwise tend to be ignored. One example is research that shows that social services refer to the child perspective to justify their decisions whenever they are unable to reach an agreement with the parents about taking a child into care, which is not the case in similar decisions where agreement is possible. It is the justification, or rather the difference, that is interesting here. There is also research that shows that when the child's views do not coincide with those of the case officer, the decision is taken referring to the best interests of the child instead. There are also circumstances where a number of parties involved cannot agree and the child perspective is invoked to force them to come to an understanding. Such compromises are not flagged as compromises per se, but as decisions taken in the best interests of the child – no one has lost, no one needs to lose face. This may well sound pessimistic, and it is certainly governed by the current focus of analytical research. However, the gloom does not lighten much if we turn to research where priority is given to evaluation. How should different organisations improve their procedures to meet the UN Convention's intentions for asylum-seeking and unaccompanied children? In answering this, a whole series of researchers have pointed out that their conclusions are rarely implemented. Since this kind of research, in this particular field, generally means some degree of stress imposed on already vulnerable children, voices have been raised asking whether such research should be carried out in the first place. The human costs are greater than the benefits.

At *Tema barn*, the Department of Thematic Child Studies – the research institute at Linköping University that I represent at this workshop – we are much exercised by how to tackle the recent innovations in financing child research; ways which often imply collaboration, even partnership, with the various organisations that are the object of our research. This problem becomes acute when it comes to asylum-seeking and unaccompanied children. Competition for finance has increased, which means not only must we cast our net wider in the hunt for funding, but also that there is a question mark over our ability to pursue independent, critical research. It is our experience that it can be difficult, in the current funding climate, to justify financing child research in fields that are not closely, and obviously, tied to institutional goals for schools or the care system, for example. It is also our impression that the interest in collaboration shown by various organisations is inspired by a wish for an evaluation – for which read confirmation – of whether the institution in question lives up to the UN Convention. The result is a forced, narrow, policy-driven child perspective. And, of course, authoritative research and expert opinions combine with the rhetoric of the child perspective to give the institution a welcome legitimacy.

Naturally, what I have sketched here are tendencies that by no means characterise everything in the field, but nevertheless they remain issues that all child researchers must confront, and that are worth discussing whenever we have the opportunity to meet. In preparing for this workshop I went through a number of articles in international journals that discuss research planning and methods for studying unaccompanied children. What struck me was the single-minded concentration on demonstrating that each particular group's research had been done correctly, with long lists of rigid rules intended to ensure there could be no doubt about the matter. Yet at the same time there is silence on the wider scholarly issues intrinsic to the use of the child perspective in this kind of work. In my view these articles, with their insistent lists, are symptomatic of the difficulty of balancing the several interests and dilemmas of this type of research. But they also reflect the difficulty of discussing the problems openly in research circles, given that the child perspective prescribes a moral responsibility for the child; a moral responsibility academics share with the organisations and individuals that they study.