Ethics in norm-critical design for children

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Abstract

Starting from the assumption that research design is itself productive, in that it helps to create social realities and thereby the research results that it aims to investigate, the paper discusses a number of dilemmas of ethics and design in the research process. The discussion is illustrated by examples from a research project on child-parent conversations about families and relationships, which involved the development of a tablet app for data collection and that took a norm-critical approach to design. The discussion focuses specifically on dilemmas of rights and risks. The paper argues for reflexive research processes and active decision making in research design, as ways of tackling dilemmas of ethics and design that may not always be foreseeable or easily solvable.

Key words: interaction, norm-critical design, ethics, children, rights, risks

Introduction

Research practices do not only reveal but also help to create realities. That is, in the production of scientific knowledge, social realities are not just described, through the research methods used, but also actually produced (Law, 2004, p.13). The methods we use as researchers shape the results that we generate. Therefore we can *learn about a research topic by looking at and investigating methodological considerations during a research process* (Sparrman, 2014, p.291). Such *looking at and investigating methodological considerations* are an example of how we as researchers can engage reflexively (Cocks, 2006; Renold et al., 2008) with our research. As a critical stance, reflexivity involves asking questions of what decisions we make, or have made, in the research process, what implicit assumptions inform our research questions and our analyses, and what the consequences of these decisions and assumptions are for the research that we carry out. Through such reflexivity, we can gain a deeper understanding both of our own methods and research aspirations, and of the kinds of reality that our research serves to create. Indeed, such an approach encourages consideration of what realities are created, by whom, and how.

In this article, I engage reflexively with a number of dilemmas of ethics and design during the research process. I apply my discussion to a research project that explores children's voices on families and relationships from a 'norm-critical' perspective, through the design and use of a tablet app. Specifically, I consider two potentially conflicting areas of ethical concerns: on the one hand, equal rights considerations regarding gender and sexuality, and children's rights to their voices and their agencies; on the other hand, the protection of children from harm, the production of sensitivity, and the risk of children experiencing their family as "not normal". In brief, the dilemmas concern rights and risks, respectively.

The *Daddy, Daddy, Child* project and norm-critical design

The research project *Daddy, Daddy, Child* investigates norms and changing norms in children's conversations about families and relationships in Sweden today. Thirteen families have participated in the project, with altogether 23 children mainly aged 5–8 years. The families consist of single mothers by choice through insemination/IVF, same-sex and different-sex parental couples, parents living together and not, and parents who are married and not.

Multimodal interactions between the children and their parents, and sometimes children on their own, were elicited and recorded using a purpose-designed tablet app, developed in the project (Ericsson and Boyd, 2014). The app is interactive through spoken utterances, clickables, sounds, and simple animation. A main character called *Moi* interacts with the user and asks questions concerning family (the child's own family as well as made-up families and families in general), being in love, living together, and weddings and marriage. In this research project, the families borrowed a tablet with the app installed and used it for as long as they

wanted, typically over a period of several weeks. They could use the app as many times as they wanted, and for as long as they wished on each occasion. Families were encouraged to behave as they wanted with the app, and parents were asked to help their children develop their answers.

The app records audio and keeps a text log of what is happening on the screen, such as what activity the user is doing, and what images she is clicking on. The user needs to click on specific buttons for Moi to ask a new question. For instance, when entering the activity called *Together*, the first page shows three different 'speech buttons'. See FIG 1. The user can click on these in any order. Clicking on *bo ihop* (*live together*), makes Moi verbally ask the question *Hur bestämmer man om man vill bo ihop eller inte?* (*How do people decide if they want to live together?*), whereas clicking on *inte bo ihop mer* (*not live together anymore*) gives the question *Ibland bestämmer vuxna att dom inte vill bo ihop längre. Varför då?* (*Sometimes grown-ups decide not to live together anymore. Why?*). Clicking on any speech button also makes the image of the people in the bottom left-hand corner spin around.
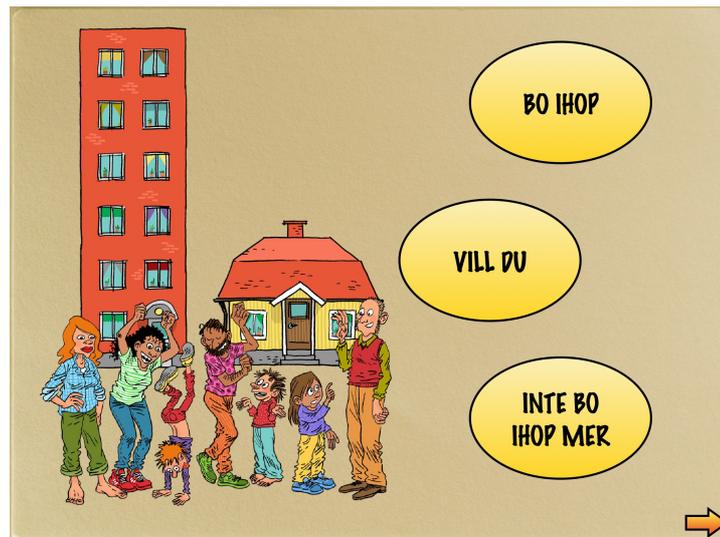

FIG 1. Screenshot of the first page of the Moi app activity Living together. Original artwork (houses and people) by Mats Källblad.

The app was created using norm-critical design (Lundmark and Normark, 2011). The term has been used in recent years for norm-critical approaches to the design of e.g. various products and graphic art.[1] A norm-critical approach is one that takes a critical stance towards norms and normalcy, investigating how norms and

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[1] See e.g. http://cargocollective.com/themeaningmaker/Norm-critical-design-Now [Accessed 22 September 2016], http://www.jamstall.nu/sa-bekvamt-ar-det-inte-normkritisk-design-11092/ [Accessed 22 September 2016]

ideas of normalcy are produced and reproduced in specific contexts. A norm-critical approach also attempts to raise awareness of or change certain norms or ideas of normalcy. The term 'norm critical' as it is used here, comes from the Swedish term 'normkritisk', used for 'normkritisk pedagogik' ('norm-critical pedagogy'), a term coined by the Scandinavian Queer Pedagogical Network (Bromseth and Darj, 2010). Norm-critical pedagogy is a development of the English-language term 'queer pedagogy' (Bryson and de Castell, 1993), extending its focus from sexuality to include critical intersectional approaches regarding also race, ability, etc. By 'norm-critical design', I then signify work with processes, products, and services that takes a critical and intersectional approach to norms and normalcy, during the design process or retrospectively. Norm-critical design attempts to identify hidden norms and tries to work productively in exposing, challenging, or changing them. Such an approach recognises that technology co-constructs norms and values (Lundmark and Normark, 2011, p.2), and analyses *technology, interaction, images, sounds, text and how they together construct meaning* (Lundmark and Normark, 2011, p.14).

The app that I designed for the *Daddy, Daddy, Child* project, embodies norm-critical design regarding first and foremost gender and sexuality, by questioning norms and by providing opportunities for other possibilities. Specifically, it is intended to challenge heteronormativity (Rich, 1980; Cameron and Kulick, 2003), that is, the idea that a specific kind of relationship and family form are valued more highly and seen as desirable, natural, and so on – the heterosexual couple and nuclear family. The norm-critical design of the app involves not making the heterosexual family and different-sex love more visible than other family forms and relationships, and by conversely providing opportunities for a number of different families and relationships. The app is also intended to challenge cisnormativity (Enke, 2013; Hornscheidt, 2015; Ericsson, in prep.), that is, the notion that everybody's gender is unambiguously identifiable, and coherent and stable over time. It does so by including characters with non-traditional or ambiguous gender presentations (Zimman, 2015, pp.200).

Rights
One aspect of ethics and design in research is the issue of rights. Here I discuss children's rights to express their views and having their experiences taken seriously, followed by considerations of equal rights regarding equality and non-discrimination. For each of these, I also discuss critical aspects, which constitute potential dilemmas.

Children's views and experiences
The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the accompanying General comment no. 12 (United Nations, 2009), establish children's rights to express their views and maintain that these views be heard. Such

rights have influenced a growing body of child-centred research, concerned with children's worlds and voices in their own right (e.g. Christensen and James, 2008; Gardner and Forrester, 2010; Corsaro, 2015).

In a similar vein, the *Daddy, Daddy, Child* project is concerned with children's views and experiences, in this case concerning families and relationships. The app was created precisely to enable children to formulate and communicate their views, and the recorded interactions are indeed full of such examples. In a discussion between Sara and her mother, following Moi' question of *Sometimes grown-ups decide not to live together anymore. Why?*, Sara and her mother talk about what is going to happen in their own family, where the parents are in a process of separation. The plan is for the children not to move, but for the parents, individually, to alternate between living with the children and in their own separate new homes. Sara here gets opportunities to voice her concerns regarding the future arrangements, saying about herself and her sister that *we'll be alone without any money* and asking her parents to *come see us* (all utterances from the data have been translated from Swedish). A little later, while talking about a different topic, Sara returns to the issue of the living arrangements and says *Do you know what, I don't actually want to move. I want to live with you* and *I want to live with* [sic] *your house*, possibly indicating that she thinks that the parents will be living together somewhere else, without the children. Thus, in the conversation with the app and the parent, the child here shows her agency and is able to make her voice heard.

A critical aspect regarding children's voices in research is that their participation is conditioned by adults. It is typically the parent who legally consents to the child's participation, and it is the researcher who formulates the research project in the first place. That is, there is a potential dilemma in children's voices only being heard through those of adults. In some ways, this may be unavoidable, but researchers also work actively to get children's informed assent, and attempt to engage children as active co-researchers (Christensen and James, 2008; Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011). Just as important is also to enable children to opt out of research.

Equality and non-discrimination

There are several laws and policies around the globe concerned with equality and non-discrimination. As an example, the purpose of the Swedish Discrimination Act is to *combat discrimination and in other ways promote equal rights and opportunities regardless of sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age* (SFS 2008:567).

One way of promoting equal rights and combatting discrimination in research is to use a norm-critical approach. For researchers working in the field, this may involve making sure that research questionnaires do not ask whether a participant's sex is (just) *male* or *female*, excluding certain transgender identities, or that

they do not ask for a child's *mother* and *father*, excluding, e.g., same-sex parents. As described above, the norm-critical design of the app in the *Daddy, Daddy, Child* project was intended to portray alternatives to cisnorms and heteronorms, through images and spoken utterances, and to provide opportunities for the interactional creation of such alternatives. As an example, in meeting an image of two women getting married and in talking about this with her mother, four-and-a-half-year-old Ebba exclaims *What! Can girls get married??* Thus, seemingly, Ebba here got the opportunity of gaining new knowledge regarding same-sex relationships.

A critical aspect in this regard is, again, the role of various gatekeepers, that is, people granting or preventing access to a research field, such as a parent who can decide whether a child can participate or not in a research study. In the research project that I discuss here, although in no way a formal criterion of selection, the children's participation in practice depended on the parents' interest in and positive attitude towards the aims of the project. In a similar way, Sparrman (2014) describes how school district managers acted as gatekeepers in not allowing any schools in the municipality to participate in her study of 9-12-year-olds and representations of love, sex, relationships, and gender in visual media.

Risks

Having considered issues regarding children's rights to express their views and more general rights concerning equality and non-discrimination, and various critical aspects and potential dilemmas with these issues in research, I now turn to aspects of risk. Rights and risks are often balanced against each other, as we will see below, and there are a number of critical aspects or dilemmas involved.

Protecting children from harm

Acts and policies regulating research ethics are concerned with the protection of research participants. For instance, Section 1 of the Swedish Ethical Review Act states that *[t]he purpose of the act is to protect individuals and human dignity when research is conducted* (SFS 2003:460). Yet, a dilemma connected to such protective aims is that they risk affecting the quality of the research, by impeding the actions of the researchers and participants. Eldén (2013), investigating relations of care from children's perspectives, outlines such risks, and argues that while the requirement of parental consent should not be removed, it needs to be examined critically. For instance, she argues that it may not necessarily always be the child who is being protected, but rather *the integrity of the "private sphere"* (Eldén, 2013, p.18).

The Swedish Ethical Review Act (SFS 2003:460) states regarding children under the age of 15 that:

> *the subject's guardians are to be informed and their consent is to be acquired* in the manner described in sections 16 and 17. *As far as possible, however, the research persons themselves are to be informed about the research*. Even if the consent of guardians has been obtained, *research may not be carried out if a person who is the subject of the research is younger than 15 years of age, understands what it entails for his or her part and objects to it being carried out*.
>   *(My emphasis)*

In accordance with this, the parents in the *Daddy, Daddy, Child* project gave informed consent for the participation of themselves and their children. The parents were in turn asked to inform the children about the project, without the presence of the researcher. The parents were also the ones talking with the children in the recorded interactions. This risks giving a great deal of control to the parents, but should also be seen against the project's aim of studying interactions between children and parents. In addition, the collected data shows many different ways in which the children are able to regulate their level of participation (Danby and Farrell, 2005). The children in the *Daddy, Daddy, Child* interactions sometimes do not give any answers at all, or nonsense answers. Another kind of example is provided by seven-year-old Tim, talking about adults deciding not to live together anymore. Tim starts to give an example of the parents of a friend of his, but then interrupts himself by saying *Actually I'm not supposed to say this so I'm not going to*. In spite of his mother informing him of research anonymity, Tim maintains his position. Thus, in this setting, Tim is agentive in protecting himself and his own interests.

The production of sensitivity
Research on intimacy and sexuality, in particular when children are involved, may be seen as sensitive research, although not necessarily, and concerns about children's sexualities need not necessarily actually be about children, but instead about adults. Sparrman (2013), in the study described above, investigates just how sexuality is enacted as a sensitive subject in the study. She finds that this is done through a number of different gatekeepers: school district managers, principals and teachers, parents, consent letters, children themselves, researchers, and even architecture. Sensitivity is being produced by the very research methods that are used.

In the *Daddy, Daddy, Child* project, sensitivity is also enacted through several different means. One is through the choice of letting the parents, rather than the researcher, inform the children about the project. Another is through consent forms and the researcher's face-to-face interactions with the parents. Sensitivity is also produced by the parents and the children themselves, as evidenced by the data collected. For instance, when Moi asks *What do you do when you're in love?*

and William turns to his dad by saying *Dad*, William's father presumably tries to alleviate any fears on the part of William by saying *This is not going to be shown on YouTube*. In doing so, he construes being in love as a possibly sensitive topic (actually William just wanted to ask for some milk). Another example is Oskar, who puts on a childish voice when he is talking about certain topics, and also makes farting sounds with his mouth, both of which help create certain things he is saying as sensitive. The dilemma here lies in the conflict between children's rights to express their views – to opt in to research – and adult concerns about what may be sensitive in the sense of harmful.

Who's normal?
In a project on families with same-sex parents, Zetterqvist Nelson (2007, p.150) describes how the study's initial focus on children's perspectives shifted to that of adults', and that one reason for this was the researcher's perceived risk of making (heteronormative) family norms visible to the children, risking feelings of being different. Again, this illustrates the difficult balance between rights and risks. *Daddy, Daddy, Child* has sought to overcome such difficulties through the norm-critical design of the app, as well as the inclusion of participants from several different family constellations.

Conclusion
Research ethics of norm-critical design for children, as in any kind of research, involves a number of different, sometimes conflicting, issues. I have illustrated these dilemmas in relation to an overarching potential opposition between rights and risks. How, then, to reconcile rights and risks? I will suggest two types of responses to this question. Firstly, while ethical review acts and ethical vetting are important, not least by forcing researchers to consider ethical implications of their work in explicit ways, I want to emphasise that many dilemmas may not be foreseeable in advance or easily solvable. Here, reflexive research processes, throughout research design at all levels, as well as after data collection has been completed, are vital. Secondly, remembering that research methods are productive (Law, 2010) and can create as well as reveal reality, we can use ethical and critical design to influence what kinds of worlds we want to bring about.

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