This is because of the burn-out and stress in social work today. The amount of clients is approximately double what it was prior to the recession, and the clients' problems are more severe than before.

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Maritta Törrönen

REFLEXIVE ETHNOGRAPHY – WHEN CHILD AND RESEARCHER MEET

"...reflexivity may play a more significant part these days than in the past in shaping how individuals place themselves and therefore how they act." (Williams & Popay 1999, 169)

This article will examine what transpires when a researcher and child meet, by drawing upon ethnomethodologic and ethnographic research and, in particular, participant observation. It aims at analysing the significance of reflexivity in the study of children and their everyday lives, as well as its potential in social work research. I shall be examining reflexivity as it is manifested in the participation, responsibility and respect between the researcher and the children encountered.

My examples will be drawn from my own experiences during the fieldwork studies for my doctoral dissertation and the manuscript reporting them (Törrönen 1998). I have analysed the way in which children organise their everyday lives in a hospital and children's home, as opposed to merely focusing on the contents of their daily lives there (cf. Mayall 1996, 98). In doing so I have attempted to determine how the social order is maintained and constructed in the institutions studied.

Becoming immersed in the field if often a longer and more active process than one might assume. It is also a process that takes some

unexpected turns (Ely et al. 1993, 50), as I was to discover. I already knew from experience that fieldwork and research are taxing both on the researcher and the people studied. I never expected the research process to be easy, however I was quite surprised to discover how exhausting the negotiations, permission applications and meetings with numerous people could be.

In this case the field does not consist of a set, existing unit, but rather is created as the research proceeds, and is collectively moulded by the researcher's practical measures, the consulted literature and the notes taken. The field is also shaped by what the researcher writes and by the way in which the reader interprets and contextualises it. (Atkinson 1992, 5-9.)

Focus on everyday life and on children as subjects

In my research I have chosen to focus on the everyday lives of children and the ways in which they organise their everyday activities, applying ethnomethodological interpretation to my examination. The children's activities are what concern me, and I have taken the research situations to be interpretive and contextual states of interaction. Ethnomethodology refers to the study of everyday knowledge and of the procedures and cognitive patterns by which members of society understand their living conditions, operate within them and influence them (Heritage 1996, 18; Garfinkel 1967, 11).

In ethnomethodological research human beings are understood as research subjects, and the main interest lies in their everyday lives. According to Anssi Peräkylä (1990, 146), ethnomethodology does not attempt to explore how people experience the world. Rather, in producing social reality, the ethnomethodological approach focuses on the analysis of everyday life activities and on how social order and consensus is reached (Peräkylä 1990, 146).

Ethnomethodologically orientated researchers stress the interpreted and constructed nature of social reality, and the attempt to produce social reality ties ethnomethodology to the tradition of social constructionism. Social reality is thus understood to be organised by

subjective meaning. The speech and action of examinees is then interpreted as being associated with a certain place and time (Giddens 1979, 3). Anthony Giddens (1977, 33-43, 155-162) has systematically attempted to unite ethnomethodological thinking with the social sciences. He views social reality not only as a construction of speech, but, contrarily, as a combination of social action, speech and structure. As such, I consider the written text to be an interpretation of the children's action and space, not as a realistic description of circumstances (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 11).

The children's home and hospital are part of the public social services system, designed to maintain the nation's welfare. Social workers make decisions about these children, and a study of the children's everyday lives reveals their consequences. This kind of study provides a different perspective of the children's life domain than would be obtained from an examination of children as clients in the social service system. As opposed to focusing on problems and difficulties, I concentrate on the ordinary aspects of the everyday lives of children that often go unnoticed.

Children suffering from maltreatment and sickness arouse the sympathy of others. Even today, people still have strong views both on how children should be raised and looked after, and on the provision of social welfare and health services. The problems faced by children, and adults' concern for their children's futures are prominent topics of public debate.

Deprivation and difficulties stress only one side of the life of the child (see Goldstein 1997, 22-23). It is impossible to make an objective study of life situations and choices, and therefore the choice always must be one of approach in attempting to describe people's lives. Any description will always be selective in relation to the state of examination (Heritage 1996, 151).

Research into social policy and social work has described the difficult life situations of families ill-being, and the insecurity of children's living conditions. Meanwhile, in a study of street children, Bar-On (1997) observed that the children had been able to acquire strength and initiative, traits that are usually valued in children. He thus dispels the uniform, negative image of street children. Bar-On observes that street children are not a homogeneous group. In their life on the streets, the children are able to learn to do various jobs as assistants, and develop

the skills required in working life. In addition, the children he observed did not all sleep in the streets; some stayed with relatives, for example, and only spent part of their time in the streets. Goldstein (1997), having interviewed adults who once lived in children's homes, also refutes the myth that they result in a poor quality of life, since the people he interviewed described their lives as being generally well-organised. They also stressed that their experiences of life had taught them to be satisfied with their achievements.

The views expressed by Bar-On (1997) and Goldstein (1997) are a challenge to address social research from angles other than those of ill-being, deprivation and difficulties, and to focus on groups other than adults. They are an incentive to shatter the customary socio-political approaches. Viewing services through the eyes of the child and childhood research also has something to offer to social work research.

Finnish social policy and social work have tended to focus on the disadvantaged (Heikkilä & Vähätalo 1994; Virtanen 1995, 9). The reports reveal in plain language that child welfare continues to be targeted primarily toward at the most disadvantaged members of society. The indicators used, such as family size, living in rented housing or being a member of the working population, may either brand people or act as omens in predicting their future. These indicators include the concepts held by the modern world of the determining force of the past, whereas the postmodern approach views people as being free from the fetters of time and the past (Bauman 1996, 195).

There has been an increase in research on child welfare in Finland since the 1970s, most of which has applied quantitative methods of analysis (e.g. Sipilä 1979). This research has addressed the regional and quantitative differences between child welfare and ill-being or deprivation among children, and has analysed the implementation and objectives of administrative procedures. Qualitative research has been gaining ground alongside quantitative research in the 1990s. Among the topics covered by the reports published in the 1990s are the development of child welfare by means of networking, the practices applied in defining deviation and social problems, the well-being of child welfare families both nationally and internationally, and the conditions in which children grow up (e.g. Pösö 1993).

Child welfare has become a subject of academic research, and there has been an increase in the publication of books and textbooks

surveying and assessing child welfare in Finland (e.g. Pulma & Turpeinen 1987). Service provision has been examined from the child's perspective for over a decade now (e.g. Siltanen 1987), but even so, it has failed to achieve much significance in socio-political research.

My previous research brought me into contact with child welfare, and in the process I realised that there are few statistics and little information on the lives of children once they have been placed in a children's home. I was reminded of the old Finnish films that ended with the marriage of the leading characters, after which we were shown nothing interesting about their lives. The researcher wishing to find out what happens after a child is taken into care or placed in a children's home draws a similar blank in consulting the reports or investigations on child welfare. There has been drastic intervention in the children's lives; they have been separated from their parents and sent to live elsewhere. What are their lives like from then on?

Furthermore, how do the everyday lives of children in residential homes differ from those in hospitals? Children are cared for and treated in both social welfare and health care institutions, and my interest has been to examine how these institutions differ from the children's point of view. This is the point at which I have crossed customary borders, in that I have not confined my studies to social welfare, but have also broadened my scope to include healthcare. Forsberg (1998, 66) examines two expert cultures in child welfare: the family support centre and the social welfare office, arguing that the strength of her comparative approach lies in its ability to observe phenomena that appear to be mundane, natural and self-evident more clearly than if the investigation were to only involve one target organisation. I, too, use one institution to throw the cultural features of another into projection, in the hope that this will reveal features of the everyday life of the child that might otherwise be overshadowed.

My studies tie in with the childhood research tradition seeking to discover how children act in various everyday situations, and how they are part of society in the process (see Strandell 1995, 18). According to this tradition, everyday social action and its analysis is regarded as being of scientific importance as a research topic. Social reality is not regarded as permanent, but as a constantly changing and renewing state, and human action is seen as meaningful and intentional. (Prout & James 1990, 15; also Corsaro 1997, 5, 18.)

My understanding of children's activities coincides to a great extent with those of Corsaro (1997), who uses the concept of the interpretive reproduction of childhood. This is criticism levelled at both the interpretive theories of childhood put forward in personal and development psychology, and the theories of socialisation. According to these theories, the child is, to exaggerate somewhat, like a being developing in steps towards adulthood, or the product of socialisation by the environment. I do not see the interpretive reproduction theory as entirely refuting the earlier theories. Rather, it adds an important and conflicting dimension: children are understood as active and creative parties to the process of interaction, and childhood is conceptualised more as a collective than an individual process. Child research may be understood as describing children individually, whereas childhood research emphasises childhood as a collective process.

The interpretive element points to the creative and innovative aspects of children's involvement in society. According to Corsaro (1997, 18), it shows that children create a peer culture of their own by creatively taking information from adults and applying it to their own conceptions. The reproduction in turn indicates that the children do not only assimilate the society and culture, but that they also take an active part role in the production and transformation of culture (Corsaro 1997, 18). Children do not just reproduce the old; they interpret society and culture in a new way. Although they may, through their own activities, take part in the workings of society, they are part of the existing social structure and its reproduction (Corsaro 1997, 18; also Prout & James 1990, 28). Childhood cannot therefore be separated from social status, gender and ethnicity (James & Prout 1990, 4).

Therefore, research on social work can be characterised as searching for new frameworks. Similarly, Williams and Popay (1999, 179) note the possibility of generating a new paradigm of welfare research and practice. Such research has been prompted by criticism of, for example, the structuralist mode, which has tended to neglect individual experience and agency, leaving the recipients of public welfare as largely forgotten inhabitants of the research terrain (Williams & Popay 1999, 157, 164). As in childhood research children are interpreted as creative agents, the same features are inherent to social work research. Hence the welfare subjects, including children, are understood as creative agents, acting upon, negotiating and developing their own strategies of welfare management.

The ethnographic research material

Research methods such as ethnographic methodology and discourse analysis, which are suitable for the study of everyday situations and interactions, have been gaining ground in childhood research, and have succeeded in broadening the study of children to include the study of childhood (Prout & James 1990, 8-9). Strandell (1992, 23) regards the reformulation of the essence of children and childhood as one outcome of the new methodological approach. In establishing the research context as an interpretive state, it is assumed that the children's interpretation of this state and what is expected of them will influence the research results (ibid.).

This different theoretical and methodological application of ethnography is becoming increasingly prevalent in various disciplines, the caring sciences among them (Boyle 1994, 160, 170-174). There are also signs of it in Finnish sociological research (e.g. Peräkylä 1990). The use of participant observation and discussions with the subjects of study are generally associated with ethnography (Lareau & Shulz 1996, 3; Boyle 1994, 158, 165).

My research is mainly centred on small-scale holistic ethnography, of which I have written an interpretive and comprehensive account. I have also searched for ideas in literature, by talking to children and adults who take care of children, and also by participating in the everyday activities of children. My aim has been to achieve "a good enough ethnography", which means that as a researcher, I have had to analyse the way I conceptualise and theorise my research, the way I produce my materials, and the nature of my interaction with the subjects of my study (Herz 1996, 517).

There are many ways of writing an ethnographic report, and they are most clearly visible in two opposing schools of thought, one emphasising the interpretive nature of a text (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 11) and the other aiming to provide as accurate and realistic a picture possible (Schwalbe 1996, 539). As I see it, even though a researcher is writing about living people, the written text will be the product of a number of interpretations which the reader further interprets from his or her own point of view. The potential of a study to capture the reality, lives and deaths of real people is limited. I personally emphasise the interpretive nature of my text, written about

living people and their activities in a specific context. I view it as an interpretation of the activities and inhabited spaces of children, rather than as a realistic description of conditions (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 11). In this respect my work is located in the social constructionist research tradition (see Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993; Miller & Holstein 1993).

In the way in which I use it, ethnography refers both to my fieldwork and to my research methods (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 25).[1] I have approached the everyday activities of children in a hospital and a children's home in many different ways. My research material was produced in the Helsinki region in Southern Finland in 1996, and supplemented in the spring of 1997. All in all it consists of 140 photos, 20 group interviews (see Merton et al. 1990), notes taken during participant observation and other literary material, amounting to a total of 892 pages of text. The group interviews were conducted with the nursing staff at seven children's homes and four wards at two hospitals, where I also examined the premises. Viewing the same phenomenon via different materials makes the interpretation of everyday life more reliable.

My main method of research has been participant observation, primarily including contact with the children, their caregivers and guardians. The participant observation took place in the somatic ward of one hospital and the long-stay unit of one children's home. It consisted of watching, listening, chatting with people and discussion. I have taken the observation situations as being states of interpretive interaction in which the children were active participants. I observed eight children in all. According to Boyle (1994, 172), the ideal size of an observation group is five, in order to most significantly reveal the group culture (see also Whyte 1981). There were five children in the children's home group I observed and three in the hospital group, their ages ranging from 5–17. The duration of the observation was approximately eight months, including individual visits at the beginning and observation periods of around one month at both the hospital and the children's home at its conclusion.

Participant observation with children differs from that with adults. Fine & Sandstrom (1988, 75-76) describe the observation of children with three words: responsibility, respect and reflection. Because children may need protection against the consequences of their action, adults

usually feel morally responsible for them. Respect is a particular research approach in which children are respected on their own terms. It incorporates the principle that, like adults, children have the right to refuse to take part in research. By reflection, Fine & Sandstrom mean that the researcher tries to understand the lives of the children on their own terms. (ibid.)

Reflexive ethnography

The approach at which I have arrived for my research is reflexive ethnography. At different stages throughout the research process I have had to consider matters such as how to enter the field, how to conduct the observation and interviews, the role of the researcher and the relationship between the researcher and the subject of study. Lareau & Shulz (1996, 4), for example, claim that the researcher's action moulds the research results. The researcher must be prepared to reformulate the research questions and their ramifications on the collection and analysis of the material.[2]

In producing my material, I have simultaneously acted as a participant in the activities of the community under study. I use the term produce rather than collect, because collection suggests that the items for study exist in the field in anticipation of being gathered by the researcher. The production of material illustrates my view of jointly produced knowledge, which is interpreted by the researcher. According to Kimmo Jokinen (1997, 25), interpretation demands membership in the culture that is the subject of interpretation. This does not, however, mean merely being present, since the interpretation process draws on certain theories and concepts. In conceptualising and interpreting culture, the researcher constitutes the target culture in his or her own specific way. Woven into this interpretation are numerous ways of life, practices and experiences, some of which are similar, others of which are dissimilar. (Jokinen 1997, 25.)

As opposed to referring to membership, I prefer to use the term involvement, although in other respects I share Jokinen's view on the multidimensional nature of the research process involved in the production and interpretation of material. I have adopted the role of a moderate participant (Spradley 1980, 60), which means that I have been

able to observe, to ask questions and to forge trusting relations as a researcher, but I have not become a member of the group. I have not sought to win the children's friendship; instead, I have tried to establish a positive contact. Strandell (1995) has stressed the absence of authority in entering the field. In other words, the researcher communicates friendship while simultaneously adhering to the role of adult. The roles of adult and researcher lacking authority more or less correspond to my position within the groups.

Through my participant observation I have been involved in interaction situations incorporating discourse, other activities and feelings. According to Heller (1979, 7), to feel means to be involved in something. The involvement varies, and it is not usually conscious. (Heller 1979, 11-13). The feelings may remain in the background, but they are nonetheless a part of human activity.

Reflexive knowledge production may be regarded as a research approach. Reflexivity is manifest in ethnographic research as participation by the researcher in the everyday lives of the persons studied, as interaction between the researcher and the group, and also in the fact that the research problem is developed through this process (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 16, 37; Boyle 1994, 165; Ely et al. 1993, 37-38). Reflexivity also gives the children room to participate in the production of the research material on their own terms.

In my research, reflexivity has also meant that the research problem has been transformed and further clarified in the process (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 25; Strauss & Corbin 1990). It has been challenging to seek out ways of producing knowledge that provide information on the way children live (see Ely et al. 1993, 57). Since I am unable as a researcher to see things through the eyes of the people I study, it is also impossible for me as an adult to see things through children's eyes. In order to bring the children's perspective into focus, I have consciously avoided ward staff meetings and "reports". I do not want the definitions produced exclusively by adults, and the official views on children and their activities to colour my own interpretations (cf. Strandell 1995, 27). Adults have been present in the observation situations, and in this context have provided me with their own interpretations of the everyday lives and the states of the lives of the children. This could not be avoided, nor have I wished to avoid it, however, I have not actively sought these interpretations.

The researcher's self-reflexivity

Reflexivity is part of the interaction between the ethnographic researcher and the subjects of study, although it also calls for self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher. As a researcher I have been part of an interactive research process, but at the same time my interpretation has been influenced by my choice of both theories and concepts. According to Geertz (1973, 30; also Jokinen 1997, 27), a good interpretation is distinguished by the fact that it either adds something to the existing corpus of knowledge, or it incorporates questions and answers raised in earlier studies in a new way.

My own life experiences and attitudes are bound up with the topic of study, its handling and interpretations (Ely et al. 1993, 37), and the various stages in the research process have aroused a wealth of emotions in me (also Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 66; Lahelma & Gordon 1997, 18). In investigating my own feelings I have resorted not only to work counselling, but also to psychological counselling in order to analyse the aspects of my research that have delighted me, my fears and uncertainties, as well as the situations I have experienced (cf. Hyrck 1995, 19; Peräkylä 1990, 167). Through work counselling I have been able to analyse events that occurred in the field and the emotions that they evoked in me. In my view, Peräkylä (1990, 167) is correct in saying that the fieldworker engaged in participant observation must be able to both overcome the difficulties he or she usually encounters in dealing with other people, and correspondingly draw on his or her own personal resources.

Furthermore, research is not simply a question of methodology and theorising; to a large extent it is also a process of writing. It is interaction with both the written page and the potential reader. Much of my writing has been the outcome of discovering questions by reading the texts by others, or discussing issues with others that have set me thinking and writing myself. Morgan (1992, 65-71) says that one of the main tasks of a text is to cause us to engage in dialogue with ourselves and with what we read. In this way we re-read ourselves.

In writing for myself, I have also written for my readers (see Game & Metcalfe 1996, 41). I have hoped that my readers be simultaneously demanding yet kind. This, in my view, is being critical in the true sense of the word.

Respect for the children

Respect for the children means that they are given respect on their own terms. Firstly, I have assumed in my research that respecting the children is central to the nature of the situations in which I have been able to observe them. Secondly, I have had to consider my attitude toward the children's right to refuse to participate in my research. When asked if they wished to take part, two of the children refused. What does this indicate? Let us now examine these two issues in greater detail.

Before embarking on my fieldwork it occurred to me that bedtime rituals might reveal some extremely important information on the children's everyday routines. However, once I was in the field and had given the matter more thought I decided it was neither tactful nor even necessary to my research to intrude in the children's intimate situations (cf. Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 22). In the children's home the youngest children go to bed first and sleep in their own rooms. In the hospital, either one or both of the parents were present when their child went to bed, at which point I chose to withdraw myself from the situation. Rather than being present in person, I have been content with reported information (cf. Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 22).

There was one exceptional situation in which a child (Kaisa) in one of the children's homes asked me as they were having supper:

> *Why don't you ever stay and put me to bed? Why don't you?* She gazed at me with big round eyes and sat her teddy beside me as we were having supper. Teddy's paw reached out for the handle of the tea cup and there was a spoon in the cup. When the time came for Kaisa to go to bed, I asked her whether she wanted me to put her to bed. She said she did. One of the nurses told me what to do: Kaisa liked being stroked behind her ear, being caressed and sung to. In this way I was able to enter into Kaisa's bedtime rituals. The teddy who had been at supper with us went to bed beside her.

However eager the researcher is to collect as much material as possible, he or she must never impose on the children. My very presence was a trial for some, and I am sure that if I had been present on every occasion the children would have felt uneasy. As such, I tried to respect their privacy.

Respecting the children also meant allowing them to refuse to participate in the research. The parents of one of the children in the hospital refused to give their consent, however the other parents and children there agreed. In the case of the children's home, I have given more thought to the reasons for and significance of the children's refusal.

I knew that from a research ethical point of view, I had arrived at an important stage: How do I personally hear the child? In practice, this meant debating whether or not to select a new unit or a completely different children's home. This was concretised for me just as I was entering the space to be observed and a couple of youngsters told me they did not want me there. The staff had been informed of my research project and my request to observe the work of the unit. On the whole they were favourably disposed towards the project and felt it was important. The staff then selected the unit for me to observe. I got to know the staff, and I agreed with the caregiver in charge about how to go about the observation process.

The staff had told the children about me and asked them how they felt about my being there. One of the children had been against it, and said that she did not want to be a 'guinea pig'. She was seconded by another child, resulting in my receiving quite a cold reception. The other five children agreed to my presence.

This was one of the most difficult moments in the entire research process. It set me thinking about whether there was any other way of approaching the children, about the reasons why the children were against my research and, above all, my coming to observe them. Ely et al. (1994, 23), quoting the field experiences of a student called Hilary, report a similar situation:

> "I have learned that it is curious but true that the process of 'entering the field' never quite ends when you do... research. You must not only get the support of your original gatekeeper, as I have mentioned, you must get the aid of others who are more closely connected to the field that you want to observe. Often you will get the overt co-operation of such individuals because they are given no choice, but if they resent your presence or feel threatened by it in some way, they can find ways of sabotaging your opportunities for observing." (Ely et al. 1994, 23)

When told about my research and asked whether they would agree to participate, the children replied in different ways. Two said 'no' and five 'yes'. They were given an opportunity to voice their opinions, and they did so. In this respect they had a choice. Perhaps the children who said 'no' wanted to test whether or not their opinions would be heard and respected. According to Fine & Sandstrom (1988, 31), children should be given a real and just opportunity to refuse to take part in a study. On the other hand, their refusal may be a reaction to the staff's enquiry, and their way of opposing those in charge. Then again, no one necessarily wants to be observed at close range. The children's replies reflect an atmosphere in which they are free to express themselves and their opinions.

Strandell (1994, 30) writes that children have not conventionally been asked whether or not they mind participating in research. In this respect I have faced an ethical challenge by asking for their consent. My encounter with the children was thus the outcome of a lengthy process of seeking permission (cf. Bluebond-Langner 1978, 245).

The children refused before I had even met them. On May 15th, 1996 I wrote in my research diary:

> "It is not sufficient to merely acquire permission to carry out research; in addition one must struggle to make oneself worth of the other person's trust. I suspect that the more disappointment a person has experienced, the more difficult this is. Why let someone near you who will soon disappear or may let you down? Trust is not built in a moment, and what if there is not sufficient potential for it?"

However, the researcher cannot, in the opinion of Fine & Sandstrom (1988, 31), abandon a group because one or more of its members refuses to take part in the research process. Questions should not be addressed to those refusing to participate, their activities should not be recorded on tape, and they should not be included in any book or article. If they are part of a group, they may be included as part of the group in the report descriptions. It is unethical to pressure these individuals into participating.

I tried to talk to the young people who had refused about their views, and I also consulted the staff. Finally, I came to the conclusion that I could not realistically expect to find a group in which all of its members

were willing to participate in my research project. I decided that I would make a point of not chatting to those who refused to participate, nor would I make any notes on them except in the context of their being part of the group. By the time I began my intensive observation, one of the two who had refused had moved to an apartment of her own. This was already being planned when I first asked her to participate, although I was unaware of this at the time.

The children's refusal is no doubt an indication of their strength and their desire to protect their community. I had come up against boundaries which I would not have encountered if I had introduced myself as a trainee. The children justified their critical attitude by saying that they felt the unit was their home. The other reason they gave was the feeling that the cosy ambience of the children's home would be disrupted by the presence of an outsider. They assumed that I looked upon the children's home as an institution, whereas for them it was home. I viewed this as an extremely telling situation. How easy it was for me, an outsider, to speak of an institution, when for the children living there it was home.

It is also possible that the two who refused did not want to be tarred with the prejudices that exist about children's homes, which they might well encounter. I did not ask the young person still living in the home who had refused to take part about what she did. I included her activities in my notes when she was part of the group and the episodes I observed. We were both in the group, and we shared some very positive moments. My visits, my discussions, and with time, my presence among the children became clearer. The fact that I was only there for a given time, in which they were able to get to know me to some extent, undoubtedly helped us to get along with each other.

The final gatekeepers to the field were thus the children whose everyday activities I wanted to examine. The difficulty was in getting them to accept my observation of the group without their being overly conscious of it. Each individual is just like a separate field demanding an approach all of its own (see Ely et al. 1993, 31-32). Not even the researcher can get close to all the people she meets. She must not be too hard on herself, as she, too, has her own distinct personality. This is something we should probably all accept both in everyday life and in research. Furthermore, it is easier to get close to people who do not feel threatened.

Responsibility

The study of children differs from the study of adults particularly because of the difference in the researcher's authority (Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 14; Hatch 1990, 253). However much the researcher tries to bridge the power gap between adult and child, a gap will inevitably remain, and its elimination would be ethically questionable. An adult, a participant observer-researcher, can never pass unnoticed in a group of children.

The participant observer has no formal authority over the children. Hart (1979, 30) works on the assumption that the researcher spending an extensive amount of time with the children he or she is studying must gain the approval of the parents. The researcher must therefore consult the adults responsible for the children, which is one way of avoiding possible misunderstandings. (Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 23; also Hart 1979, 30.) It also takes time for a stranger to win the children's confidence.

In carrying out my research, I first negotiated and talked with the adults and then gradually got to know the children. I reserved time for the children to 'check me out', during which time I talked more with the adults, allowing the children to observe me. They were thus able to watch me from afar, to come closer and retreat at their own leisure, until after a couple of weeks I was able to sit among them without their being constantly aware of my presence. However, they were never able to totally ignore my presence any more than I was. While I never became invisible, I did become 'part of the furniture'.

Corsaro (1985, 118) has given quite a lot of thought to the size difference between adults and children, specifically focusing on questions of power. He spent long periods of time with children in a day nursery and developed a "reactive" strategy for entering the field. He never took the initiative in engaging in interaction with the children, but rather always waited for the children to make the first move. Bluebond-Langner (1978, xi), on the other hand, observed children in a hospital and applied a form of play therapy. Her aim was to reveal the children's thought process as accurately as possible, to discover their interactive strategies and their understanding of their own situations. Play, in her opinion, permitted the children to reflect on their own behaviour without being asked about it directly. She felt that direct questions would act as an obstacle in the study of the phenomenon. (Bluebond-Langner 1978, xi.)

My strategy was akin to Corsaro's in that I generally waited for the children to take the initiative in engaging in conversation or some activity, although in some situations I did adopt a more active role. I did not really interview the children, rather, I reacted to their questions or took up a subject raised by them and joined in the conversation in whatever way seemed natural (cf. Whyte 1981, 302).

As an exception, I interviewed two young people over the age of fourteen in their own rooms. On these occasions I guided the conversation by asking questions (Uusitalo 1991, 90). The young people were eager to talk about themselves. In this sense the sessions differed from the observation situations, in which the children gave either brief or playful answers to my questions. There may be several reasons for this. One is that the children may well seek to entertain one another by giving the researcher crazy answers. On the other hand, the researcher's questions about everyday life and the difficulty in answering them are indicative to me of the discursive and practical consciousness conceptualised by Giddens (1982, 30-32). Certain everyday situations are difficult to put into words because they are deeply rooted in our practical consciousness. When someone inquires about everyday situations, they may well sound banal and uninteresting, although the difficulty in answering them may arouse mirth.

Since the focus of my research has been on the everyday lives of children as opposed to their worlds of experience, I have chosen the Bluebond-Langer approach of becoming acquainted with children and the things they do. Like Corsaro, I have tended to wait rather than take the initiative, and I joined in activities at their suggestion. In order to do this I adopted a low profile, sat down and prepared myself to listen. This may sound simple, however in practice it was not always easy to simultaneously allow time for the children to make their own suggestions and be actively present.

Producing the everyday

I began by conducting participant observation sessions, by acquainting myself with the children, their caregivers/nurses and their daily routines. I watched, listened and asked; I observed anything that aroused my scientific curiosity and placed what I saw and heard in perspective. At

some points I was more active, while at others I remained in the background and observed (see Atkinson 1992, 2). My aim was to keep an open mind and chat with the children so there was as little structure and guidance to the conversation as possible.

The children formulated their own conceptions of who the researcher was and what she wanted to know. (Fine & Sandstrom 1988, 17). The youngest reckoned at the beginning that I must be a queen or a princess. My earrings and necklace and my overall appearance must have suggested this. One of the children referred to me as a writer. And indeed, I had introduced myself as someone writing a book about children who live in a children's home or are in hospital.

I noticed that although I always explained why I was present in the same way, people's attitudes to me and my project varied. To some adults I represented a threat to the work they were doing, while others felt I might pass on the message of their exhausting working conditions, and for some I added a touch of variety to the ordinary monotony of their day. To the children I was generally seen as a companion and possible playmate, while a few viewed me as a threatening adult outsider. The children conceived of what I did in relation to my "book" and writing. While carrying out his own fieldwork, William Whyte (1996, 27; also 1981, 300) also noticed that people developed their own explanations for what he was doing. In actuality, he was writing a book about Corneville. People's attitudes toward him depended more on their personal view of him than on the way in which he explained the objectives of his research.

Being a participant observer, I did not take part in the work of the home or ward, instead participating in the day-to-day activities in the way that seemed most natural to me in my capacity as researcher.[3] At the children's home I joined the children and staff for meals and coffee, set or cleared the table, read the newspaper or a women's magazine, sat in the kitchen or living room, watched what the children were doing, played with, chatted and read to them. In the hospital I was with the children in their ward rooms or went with them to other parts of the hospital. In their rooms we watched television, made things, sang, played games, or I sat and watched them doing things (cf. Bluebond-Langner 1978, 246-247). Sometimes I simultaneously chatted with the child's mother or father.

My experience with the children was the same as with adults; I got

to know some better than others. All of the children I observed in the hospital were between the ages of 5 and 8, and I got to know them quite well. At the children's home I got to know the three children under the age of 12 better than the two who were over 14. I spent most of my time with the younger children, and felt that they were acceptant of my company. They approached me and chatted to me of their own accord, tugging me by the hand to join in their games and chatting amongst themselves in my presence.

In a way, the children themselves assigned me my roles: with the younger children I achieved the role of a familiar adult, whereas to the older children I remained more in the role of a strange observer. This was difficult, however I did not alter it. Perhaps it requires a certain kind of personality to approach young people, and also possibly takes more time to get to know them than the younger children. Young people have more rights than younger children, with which they command their own space.

Roger Hart (1979, 32) has made an ethnographic and environmental-psychological study of children's activities in their immediate home environment. He encountered children in the streets, in yards, in the fields and at school. He was more successful than I in getting to know young people, in that young people command a larger physical area than young children. Since the latter occupy a smaller area, it is easier for their parents, adults or a researcher to encounter them.

At the beginning of the observation period I tried to gain an overall impression of the children's daily routine. In time, my observations concentrated on the functional and chronological episodes in which I was involved. I made my notes after interaction episodes with children, parents, nurses/caregivers and doctors, and they are my interpretation of what we produced together. They are not only the children's interpretations, for in a way the children were both the focus of the discourse and involved in the production of their own stories. The presence of adults is a firm feature of everyday life in both a children's home and a hospital, and I did not, therefore, confine my discussions solely to the children. I attempted to confine my observations as far as possible to "natural" everyday situations, and did not try to modify them. The following entry in my diary was written in the hospital setting, and describes both the way in which the children participated in the production of my material in addition to our direct interaction.

> If I address a question to the parent, the child tends to comment on it. The child would look at his parent and talk to him, but what the child said was also intended for me. Similarly, a child in the children's home might comment on something that I said in talking to one of the caregivers. The children sometimes seemed to be disconcerted by direct comments, sometimes giving only one word answers. When they are allowed to join in the conversation, they comment freely without any embarrassment. We proceed on their terms, as it were, and not in a way in which they might get the sense that a strange adult comes along and fires questions at them.

This entry brings out the significance of jointly produced information, and serves as a reminder that joint production is more inherent to conversation than to the interview situation. According to the children's home staff, doing something such as having supper or baking together with the children stimulates the most active conversations. I also noticed that when I chatted with to the children as we did something together, the discourse flowed naturally. Here is an example of a note I made after chatting with Kaisa in her room:

> Kaisa is listening to a pop channel on the radio while humming a song by Tina Turner. I am so busy chatting with and watching her that I bang my head on the edge of the sleeping platform. I say that this corner is made for children, not adults. Kaisa says: *My mum always bangs her head on it, too.* I say she'll have to grow quite a lot before she bangs her head on it. She stands up and I measure how much she will have to grow. Kaisa knows: *I'm going to be here until I'm grown up.* She shows me her baby doll and where to press it to make it cry.

Conclusion

What is reflexivity? What does it demand of the researcher? What can it offer the study and practice of social work?

One of the main contributions of my research is methodological. I call my way of approaching children reflexive ethnography, and it is part of ethnographic research methodology. It underlines the adult's

responsibility as a researcher, respect for the children as subjects of research, as well as a desire to understand how children live. Reflexive knowledge production may be regarded as a research approach by the subject. Participant observation, the method used in my research, permits both the researcher to participate in the everyday lives of the children, and the children to participate in the production of the research material. Reflexivity calls for sensitivity on the part of the researcher. It requires that the researcher be aware of others' feelings, through which he or she will be able to find the methods best suited to the situations presenting themselves throughout the course of the research process.

The other main conclusion of my research is that the direction of the research focus is important. Activities that may seem insignificant and pass unnoticed become significant. The children in both the children's home and the hospital become people with feelings who experience everyday joys and sorrows. The difficulties do not vanish in my research; instead they become part of ordinary human life. The constraints on the children's activities are to a great extent already imposed on the spaces I have studied, although the children make use of the social infrastructure. By drawing on both the skills and knowledge they have learnt and their own wits, they build themselves a place of their own. They alleviate the tedium of their routine everyday lives by seeking out pleasures – a typical feature of their everyday dichotomy. Thus, they do not merely submit to the authority of adults and institutions, since their activities recreate both the space and its culture. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that the social order in the spaces I studied is maintained by the children's involvement, engagement and emotions. Without the sense of being an insider, important human relations and emotions, the children would not be prepared to commit themselves to life in an institution.

Research conducted reflexively is revealed as a complex chronological and contextual process. Vital elements of this process are the human interaction between the researcher and the subjects, and the researcher's self-reflexivity on his or her theoretical premises, concepts and methods. Reflexivity does not silence the subjects' own voices or ways of expressing themselves. As such, the researcher moves closer to the way in which the subjects understand their everyday lives.

Notes

1 Ethnography has no prototype, nor is there any unanimity as to its nature (Boyle 1994, 162). Ethnography usually refers to the observation and written description of the activities of some group, but it may also refer to fieldwork.

Participant observation has traditionally been used in social anthropological and ethnographic research to study a community for so long that it reveals its members' own perspective. Ethnographic research has accordingly been described as holistic ethnography , and as distinct from structural ethnography (Tesch 1992, 24). Structural ethnography concentrates on describing the meanings assigned by cultural groups and manifest especially in speech (ibid.). In holistic ethnography, the researcher participates in the everyday lives of the people studied, spending time with them. He watches them, listens to what they say and asks questions. He produces materials of several kinds to throw light on the phenomenon under . (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 1.)

It may be assumed in ethnographic research that the culture and its meanings are common and shared (Geertz 1973, 10-13; Boyle 1994, 160). Culture has a number of definitions, and the theoretical approach of the ethnographic researcher affects the way he interprets the discourse and behaviour of the people he is studying. According to Boyle (1994, 160), the researcher, in interpreting people's speech and action, may understand the shared meanings which we call culture. Geertz (1973, 14) attaches culture to a specific context that can be described with understanding (also Geertz 1983, 68-70). Geertz (1973, 14) uses the concept of thick description to refer to the understanding description of culture. This is not content merely to list social events, behaviour and institutions; it also interprets their contextual meaning.

Ethnographic research can represent different genres, types of literature, etc. The Chicago school, for example, roamed the streets and city districts, whereas the Street Corner school confined itself to one street, block or street corner. (Atkinson 1992, 33-34.) Often quoted examples of classical ethnographic research are William Whyte's Street Corner Society (1943/1981) and Paul Willis's Learning to Labour (1977/1980).

2 The analysis of my research material has been a complex process composed of at least three stages. At the first stage, I addressed the material as an entity, like Lareau (1996, 210), and familiarised myself with it (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 210). I read all the material I had written and produced, listened to the interviews, collected hints, ideas and comments. I then classified the contents of my notes in event episodes describing the children's activities. I sought out concepts to help me understand what was happening in the various descriptions in the material (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, 209). At the third stage, I formulated my research questions by drawing on my research material and identifying the main themes, and then divided the material into thematic entities.

3 According to James Spradley, the researcher engaging in participant observation examines his own and others' reactions. He asks himself why he reacted to events in the way he did and examines them from many angles. He feels he is both a participant and an outsider, and tries to come to terms with this. He should be aware of the things which others either do not notice or take for granted. He makes notes on what he sees and experiences. (Spradley 1980, 58). In discussing note-taking, Annette Lareau (1996, 219), for example, points out that she is a researcher observing situations. This has prevented her from feeling integrated with the group she has been studying.

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III

DISCOVERING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES