

**THE ACTIVE, COMPETENT CHILD, CAPABLE
OF AUTONOMOUS ACTION:
AN INHERENT QUALITY OR THE OUTCOME OF A RESEARCH PROCESS?**

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Abstract – The present article explores how “the active, competent child capable of autonomous action” is enacted through the methodological consequences of participant observations. The underlying idea is to investigate what ethnographic participant observations can tell us about child culture. Methodological choices and the ways in which researchers approach a field are not neutral processes. Moreover, the methodological choices made produce the ‘realities’ of the topic under study. The article highlights how a research project’s methodological outline, the way the field was approached, and the way the researcher and research participant interacted during the study enacted notions of the active, competent child capable of autonomous action in child culture. This is done by exploring – using detailed analyses of a single example – how research methodologies, in general, and participant observation, in particular, can tell us something about a research topic.

Keywords – Active, child, capability, competency, autonomy, dependency, ethnography, participant observation

Résumé – *L’enfant actif, compétent et capable d’autonomie : qualité intrinsèque ou résultat d’un processus de recherche ?* Nous proposons dans le présent article d’explorer comment la conception de l’enfant actif, compétent et capable d’autonomie dans ses actions peut être interprétée à la lueur des choix méthodologiques effectués, lesquels exercent une influence directe sur les conclusions de recherche en situation d’observation participante. L’idée sous-jacente à cette étude est d’examiner ce que l’observation participante de type ethnographique peut nous apprendre sur la culture enfantine. Les choix méthodologiques ainsi que la façon dont les chercheurs abordent leur domaine de spécialité sont loin d’être neutres. De plus, ces mêmes choix méthodologiques actualisent en quelque sorte la réalité du sujet à l’étude. Notre article met en évidence la façon dont l’intersection des grandes lignes méthodologiques d’un projet de recherche, de l’approche privilégiée et des interactions chercheur-participant lors de

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l'étude conditionne la notion-même d'enfant actif, compétent et capable d'agir de manière autonome dans le domaine de la culture enfantine. À partir de l'analyse détaillée d'une étude de cas, nous envisagerons ce que les méthodologies de recherche en général et l'observation participante en particulier nous apprennent sur la conduite d'une recherche.

Mots-clés – Actif, enfant, aptitude, compétence, autonomie, dépendance, ethnographie, observation participante

INTRODUCTION

Methodological choices and the ways in which researchers approach a field are not neutral processes. Researchers' methodological choices, as Law (2004) suggests, also produce the 'realities' under study. In the present article, we analyze ethnographic material from a study on activities for children in four contexts of cultural institutional practice that we have visited together with children and their families. Our focus has not been on the institutional perspective, rather on how children and their families – in their role as active visitors – use these institutions in practice. In the text, we use the material to analyze the ways in which choice of method, i.e. participant observation, may have implications and play a role in the process of enacting the very object of our research: child culture activities. Thus, we examine our own study and the participant observation we have used. However, we also examine one of the long-held positions in the Social Studies of Childhood: the notion that children are active, competent and capable of autonomous action. We emphasize here the importance of decentering the child and situating her/him in practice (Kullman 2012; Sparrman & Sandin 2012) when trying to understand how the active, competent child, who is capable of autonomous action, is enacted.

As mentioned, a fundamental position in what is known as the Social Studies of Childhood is that "Children are not just the passive subjects of social structure and processes" (Prout & James 1997: 8), and since at least the late 20th century, a cherished notion among researchers in this group is that children are active, competent and capable of autonomous action (Lancy 2012; Lee 1998; Oswell 2013). As Lancy (2012) has demonstrated, researchers in anthropology and sociology alike seldom define exactly what "agency" means or what the notion of children as inherently competent agents implies. Furthermore, many anthropological studies have indicated that this notion is a late-modern European construct (Lancy 2008). Nevertheless, the conception of children as active, competent and capable of autonomous action has spread well beyond the boundaries of the academic debate and throughout society as a whole. Brembeck *et al.* (2004: 7) even argue that "the idea of the competent child is a fundamental part of the modernity project in most Nordic countries". The notion of children as competent has influenced both how we conceive children and, as

Brembeck *et al.* (2004) argue, the way in which different institutions for children – for instance schools, pre-schools, daycare centers and, we could to add, child culture institutions – are organized. Thus, child culture institutions have been designed for children who have such behavioral traits (e.g. competence, autonomy) to facilitate such behavior in children as well as to produce such behavior.

Olwig & Gulløv (2003: 7) warn us that: “By focusing on institutions for children [when doing research], one runs the risk of tautologically reproducing a folk model of children and childhood because these institutions are founded on exactly these models”. This warning also applies to our study of child culture where we have followed children and their families’ visits to four contexts of cultural practice: children’s museums, theme parks, amusement parks and science centers. In such contexts, practices are especially designed for the active, competent child who is capable of autonomous action. One could of course, like Lee (1998), Oswell (2013) and Szulc *et al.* (2012) asks what autonomous children are really like. We argue that there has often been too much focus both on children as autonomous doers and on child culture as something children set in motion by themselves, and not enough focus on the supporting networks that they depend on and that make children’s actions possible (Sparman 2011).

But what do these supporting networks consist of? Children have often been studied and portrayed as mere appendages to their parents and family. However, from the very start, the Social Studies of Childhood advocated a change in perspective. Prout & James (1997) emphasized the particular usefulness of ethnography in studying and more accurately depicting children’s real everyday lives and the many different ways in which children interplay with various actors and structures in the continuous construction and reconstruction of childhood. As Law (2004: 31) explains, however, reality is “not independent of the apparatuses that produce reports of reality”. Of course, the apparatuses Law refers to are primarily the various kinds of technological devices, laboratories, computers and probes used by natural scientists in their work. Nevertheless, as we all know, many social scientists also use different devices, and ethnographers are of course no exception. Some examples of technological devices we have used to collect material in our research process are tape recorders, video and still cameras.

Science and technology studies (STS) scholar Law (2004) states in his book, *After Method. Mess in Social Science Research*, that methodological choices and the ways in which researchers approach a field “produce the reality they understand” (Law 2004: 5). Various STS scholars interested in the social construction of scientific knowledge and data (Hine 2001; Knorr-Cetina 1999; Latour & Woolgar 1979, 1986) have demonstrated the many different ways in which science and what are generally understood as objective, “real” scientific facts are produced through various laboratory practices. All these researchers have focused on scientists working in the

natural science tradition. But arguably, social science and ethnography are no different. Already in the early nineteen-twenties, Malinowski pointed out the discrepancy between the material the ethnographer collects during his/her fieldwork and how the material is later presented as research results.

“In Ethnography, the distance is often enormous between the brute material of information – as it is presented to the student in his own observations, in native statement, in the kaleidoscope of tribal life – and the final authoritative presentation of the results” (Malinowski [1922]1989: 3-4).

Similar discussions on the difference between data collection, the research process and the results have been pursued by other researchers as well. For example, Bellah (1977: xi) writes that “We all know that field data [...] are not *Dinge an sich* but are constructs of the process by which we acquire them” (Emphasis in original). Moreover, Rabinow (1977: 150) argues that “Facts are made” and continues “Therefore they cannot be collected as if they were rocks, picked up and put into cartons and shipped home to be analyzed in a laboratory”.

In ethnographic research, particularly when using participant observation, “The ethnographer is a researcher, a scientist working in the laboratory that the participant observation provides” (Agar 1996: 9). Moreover, the researcher is “the primary research instrument” (Walsh 2004: 226): “he or she is the research instrument par excellence” (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 17). In spite of this critique, research today is dominated by outcomes that depict aspects of the research objects “out there” (Alvesson 2003). In traditional research, the data collection process – in which researchers struggle, fail and in the end often prevail – is seldom considered interesting and is, thus, often described only very briefly as a coherent narrative in a methods section (Hill 2006). Nevertheless, the process in which the researcher negotiates and gains access to the field, enters the field and the way in which field relations are developed do produce crucial knowledge that can be used both to dissect and to give a fuller picture of the topic under study (Kullman 2012; Sparrman 2005; Sparrman 2014). The present study adds to this perspective by focusing on the various ways in which the research process as well as the relations and interactions between the researcher and research participant also bring the research material/data into existence. More precisely, we ask questions about the ways in which the researcher creates its research object – in this case, the active, competent child who is capable of autonomous action.

A STUDY OF CHILDREN IN FOUR CONTEXTS OF CULTURAL PRACTICE

The present article derives from a project focusing on activities for children in four contexts of cultural practice: children’s museums, theme parks, amusement parks and science centers. These settings combine entertainment and learning as well as

consumption and cultural experiences and knowledge, and they attract millions of visitors each year. According to the Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy (Kulturanalys 2015), in 2013 at least 2,7 million museum visits were done by children and youth under the age of 18 in Sweden. This was a slight increase in visitors from the previous year. The settings focused on in this study are generally defined as offering practices for child culture. In the present article, we will use one ethnographic example from one of the four settings we have focused on in our research project: a Swedish science center – an institution that exhibits hands-on science experiments for children.

The key example in the present article focuses on a visit to a science center located in an old sugar mill warehouse in a part of Linköping, the fifth largest city in Sweden. There are 19 science centers in Sweden; they have different profiles, but can be described as “interactive establishments intended to increase people’s interest in the natural sciences and technology” (our translation) (*The Swedish National Agency for Education* 2013). These establishments mix learning and entertainment and are open for school visits as well as the general public. Their primary focus is on exhibitions presenting various experiments that visitors get to explore first-hand on their own. This aspect is what signifies a science center (Beetlestone *et al.* 1998; Hanås & Hanås 1999). The specific science center in focus here states on its website (www.fenomenmagasinet.se) that it has approximately 40.000 visitors each year. Its exhibition contains around 200 experimental stations.

When designing our project, we did not want to employ an experimental design, but instead to follow different visits as they naturally unfolded. Our main focus was on children visiting with their families. To try to recruit families, we designed a recruitment text that we later used on the establishments’ websites, Facebook pages, on posters at one establishment, at local libraries and in local papers. We are fully aware of the diversity of family structures in Swedish society and did not want to exclude any kind of family constellation from our project. We wanted children (aged 4 to 12 years) with “families” to take part, but we did not necessarily want to attract only nuclear families. In our advertisement we wrote that:

“To be specific, we want to make it clear that when we write “family” we of course want to include all of the various kinds of family constellations existing in today’s society. If you consider yourself a family, we will consider you a family! The only important criterion is that there is at least one child in the family who is between 4 and 12 years old”.

As it turned out, though our advert may have managed to help us avoid only ending up with one kind of family, and disqualifying everyone except nuclear families, it also allowed for variety in the family constellation that we had not anticipated.

One family visit was somewhat unconventional. When arranging this visit, Lisa, the 5-year-old girl in the family, decided that she wanted to visit the science center alone

with the researcher without her two parents and two younger siblings present. Here, it is important to mention that this particular child, Lisa, was the daughter of an acquaintance of one of the researchers. The 40-year-old male researcher (T.S) and the girl had met, but he did not really know her. The parents thought the project sounded interesting and signed up, but Lisa was the one who decided that she should go alone. The parents asked the researcher if this was okay. Lisa did not in any way correspond to our idea of a family. Still, we did not want to disqualify any kind of visitor and thus decided to grant her request. The researcher met Lisa at the science center entrance where she was waiting with her father and one of her younger brothers. Lisa and the researcher left the rest of the family who returned after about one and a half hours when the visit was finished.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND ITS METHODS

Much of the previous research on child culture institutions has focused primarily on the conceptual level and adults' production of culture for children rather than on user perspectives and practices, and has consequently failed to consider the role visitors' own understandings and use plays in these institutions' enactment processes (Jenkins 1998). Hooper-Greenhill (2000) argues that museums have traditionally approached their visitors as passive receivers. Inspired by this critique, in the present research project we have approached our research object – children and their families – as active visitors.

To capture the processes through which child culture is enacted, our project has employed a variety of research methods. We have used ethnographic and visual methods with participant observations (Pink 2001) to study child culture. Some of these observations were made using video-recordings. Observations were carried out at two children's museums during a period of two months. Interviews were conducted with parents in one focus group and with children in one focus group and with a family in one regular interview. Finally, four interviews were conducted with personnel working at the children's museums. Ten children and their families (all and all 44 informants) were followed during their visits to a theme park and an amusement park during a four-month period of fieldwork (all and all 11 visits). These children and families were also interviewed before and after the fieldwork. Three families' and seven pre-school and school groups' visits were observed at the science center. Here, children and parents were also interviewed, as were people working at the science center. We have also studied one school trip to an amusement park using GPS and documented an amusement park and a theme park using still camera. Moreover, we studied material on the Internet published both by the establishments under study and by parents in various blogs.

When trying to recruit families and children for the present ethnographic study, we received the following reply from one parent:

“I believe, however, that it will be hard for you to get results that are not affected by your presence. My children would think it was extra fun if somebody joined in to film us. They would ask you more questions than you ask them. I also know that I would act differently; I would never, for example, get angry with my children if you joined in”.

This reply caused us to reflect on the research process, the researcher’s role in this process and the object the researcher wishes to investigate. While we do not share the almost positivistic view on science and the fear of contaminating research results presented by the parent above, the reply highlights an old, but nonetheless important message – method matters.

The visit where the researcher followed Lisa was a participant observation using a video camera. But what does participation really mean in a participant observation? How much should a participant observer participate? These questions are part of an ongoing debate in ethnography. Ethnographic fieldwork is largely a matter of building and upholding good relations vis-à-vis research participants. Close relations with research participants are necessary if one is to understand what is going on in the field (Agar 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Malinowski [1922]1989; Whyte [1943]2010). Moreover, Duranti (1997: 89) claims that “The observation of a particular community is not attained from a distant and safe point but by being in the middle of things, that is, by participating in as many social events as possible”. And again, as early as in 1922, Malinowski argued that the ethnographer should remain “in as close contact with the natives as possible” ([1922]1989: 6), that the ethnographer “must be an active huntsman” ([1922]1989: 8) and that “it is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join himself in what is going on” ([1922]1989: 21). Nevertheless, it is still an open question whether participation should be what Duranti (1997: 99) calls “*complete participation*, in which researchers intensively interact with other participants and might even get to participate in and perform the very activity they are studying” or rather mere “*passive participation*, in which the ethnographer tries to be as unintrusive as possible”. In this study, the researcher’s aim was to observe Lisa’s actions, and thus he did not want to direct her or influence her *too much*. The researcher did not consciously try to break what Whyte ([1943]2010: 433) calls one of the basic rules of participant observation by influencing the course of events. However, as we will show in the article, at times during the visit we can see that the researcher was more active, that he directed Lisa and stimulated her exploration in various ways. In the quote above, the mother warns us that she and her children would not act naturally if they took part in a study, because they would bias the research results. Again, we do not share this somewhat positivist notion of the research process. Still, we believe it is important to highlight

how a particular choice of method and the type of interactions that this method can generate fuel the production of a research object – the very same research object we set out to study in the first place. In the present study, we set out to study an autonomous, competent child's visit to a cultural institution for children and, as it turned out, our choice of method and approach to using this method produced a child with just such an ontology.

The material have been analyzed using guidelines presented by Ryan & Bernard (2003), which means that we have tried to identify themes, patterns and metaphors in the material that problematize the well-known and taken-for-granted in previous research. In the present article, we have chosen to focus on examples from one visit to show how child culture is enacted. The chosen examples do not stand out as unusual. The reason we have chosen to focus on only one visit and participant observation in the present article is that we wish to examine the details of how methodological choices also create the topic under study – in this case the active, competent child who is capable of autonomous action.

THE RESEARCHER AS CONVERSATIONAL PARTNER

A story like this could take different directions. We could adhere to a more traditional way of presenting research and focus our report solely on Lisa and the way she embarked on her visit, her interaction with the exhibition and the many experimental stations and how Lisa went about “doing child culture”. Lisa was full of energy, active and eager to explore although she often used the experiments in a way that their designers had probably not intended. Five-year-old Lisa's choice to visit the science center on her own could be highlighted as an example of her autonomy and we could provide numerous accounts exemplifying Lisa's active engagement and competence in taking on the science center. So what could possibly be the problem with that? While Lisa did choose to visit without her parents and siblings, she was never alone. A 40-year-old male researcher followed her at all times. This is not to say that Lisa was nothing but a gullible research object being ordered around by the adult researcher. Still, what follows is an outline of a collaborative process, involving Lisa, material artifacts as well as the adult researcher.

This was Lisa's first visit, and she appeared somewhat hesitant upon entering the science center. Lisa and the researcher stood in the doorway facing the many experimental stations located on the first floor. To get Lisa started, the researcher, who accompanied her during the entire visit, tried to make some conversation and said something like “there are a lot of things you can try out here”. Lisa did not answer, but went over to one of the experimental stations. When approaching the experiment, Lisa looked a bit curious and asked what one is supposed to do at that station. While the researcher did not want to disturb, affect or direct Lisa's

exploration, he felt he had to respond and thus said that she should try something and see what happens.

During the visit, the researcher was – to use Malinowski’s words – both standing at “a distant and safe point” filming Lisa’s actions from a couple of meters’ distance so as to include Lisa, her activities and a larger part of the surroundings in picture and “in the middle of things”, trying along with Lisa to figure out how the experiments were supposed to work. When reviewing the video material from the visit, however, it is striking how the researcher found himself in something of a dilemma during the visit. As mentioned, he consciously did not want to influence the course of events. He wanted to observe Lisa’s activities, to see what experiments she chose to test, how she tried to carry out the experiments, what she liked and did not like. Nevertheless, when reviewing the video material, it is obvious that he interferes in the research process. Without any other adults, parents, or siblings around, the researcher, possibly unconsciously, from time to time started acting like a guide, or like an adult in charge. As mentioned, ethnographic fieldwork is largely concerned with building and upholding good relations vis-à-vis research participants. Complete silence, not replying when spoken to, is not the way forward and would simply not work when accompanying a 5-year-old. Naturally, the researcher wanted Lisa to feel as comfortable as possible, to continue exploring the place and not cut the whole visit short and return to her parents too soon. Possibly as a result of this, he made small talk with her, answered questions, explained things and even at times made suggestions about how to proceed with the experiments and gave suggestions on other experiments she might find interesting.

Throughout the visit, the researcher tried to balance his level of engagement in Lisa’s interaction with the exhibition’s experiments. At times he tried to keep a low profile to let Lisa try to discover on her own how to carry out an experiment, but other times the researcher gave her a hand. There was also an ongoing conversation between the two. Lisa commented on what she saw and the researcher, possibly trying to encourage her explorations, made comments and asked her what she saw: “Do you know what this is?” Yet this interaction was not a one-way street. When building a puzzle in one part of the science center, Lisa turned to the researcher when she was finished, showed what she had built and asked: “Can you see what it is?”. Throughout the visit she asked “What is this?” and “How does this work?”, “What are you supposed to do here?” and “Why is it like this?” when approaching different experiments, in this way positioning the researcher as a knowledgeable, adult helper. When watching frogs in a terrarium, sitting still on leaves in a jungle environment, Lisa asked “Why are they [the frogs] almost not moving, do the frogs have an enemy around here?”.

During the visit, Lisa used the researcher as a conversational partner, a substitute for a more traditional companion for a 5-year-old. Through her commenting, she

drew the researcher into her activities, made him part of her experience, made him respond to and confirm her experience. This required the researcher to come closer and take an active part in Lisa's visit to be able to both see and hear her. Previous research has highlighted how children focus on their friends during science center visits (Axelsson 1997; Carlisle 1985; Samuelsson 2013). Scholars have also stressed children's use of comments like those Lisa made continuously throughout the visit, when she verbalized what she saw and asked questions. Similar behavior has been noted among children both during visits to science centers and during their everyday life in pre-school (Dencik *et al.* 1988; Samuelsson 2013; Strandell 1994). Dencik *et al.* (1988) argues that children are social magnets (our translation from the original Swedish): children attract other children and often want to have other children close to them. Children use short vocal exchanges to attract other children and to try to include them in their ongoing experience, to get other children to share it. According to Dencik *et al.* (1988), children try in this way to confirm that they and the people around them are sharing the same experience, and are part of the same activity. During this particular visit, 5-year-old Lisa had no friends around, but this did not keep her from commenting.

THE RESEARCHER IN *LOCO PARENTIS*

However, the researcher's "interference" in Lisa's visit did not end there. When Lisa, who appeared to be a fearless 5-year-old, at times used experimental stations in ways the researcher thought might cause her to get hurt, he asked hesitantly "You'll let me know if you need help won't you?" and advised her to take care so she did not hurt herself. The visit clearly highlights some of the problems an adult researcher might be faced with when conducting research with children. This is not only an example of how "the child" was produced in a cooperative process between the child, the adult and material artifacts. In line with Johansson's (2012) discussion, it is also an example of how "the adult" was produced. Still, the researcher had not planned to take on the responsible, adult caretaker role during the visit, but instead he fell into it and was defined as such by Lisa from time to time. Throughout the visit, the researcher alternated between different more or less active positions and was pushed into them by Lisa and her actions. The researcher's positions also had effects on Lisa and her position. When, on one occasion, Lisa managed to dismantle and break part of an experiment while using it, the researcher did not wait for Lisa to ask for help but jumped right in and helped her fix it. When Lisa turned to the researcher and asked if she was allowed to actually climb into parts of the exhibition, he said "no". Similarly, when Lisa tried to open doors to rooms prohibited for visitors, the researcher informed her that she probably was not allowed to enter. In both instances, Lisa did as she was told and thereby affirmed the researcher's position as an adult in charge and her own position as a compliant child. The researcher's comments not only echoed a

parental discourse, but probably also gave voice to the intentions of the exhibition producers. Not all areas at the science center are open to the public. Some doors at the science center are closed (and locked) and some doors have stop signs put there to discourage and stop visitors from entering. Some experiments, in which one is supposed to read and watch only, are placed behind protective fences or screens. Sometimes there are written signs explaining this (signs that most 5-year-olds cannot read), but at other times the visitor has to interpret the symbolic meaning of a protective screen or a chain hanging in front of an open doorway.

The science center states on its website that “When you come to us you should be prepared to play!” (our translation) and it is a place that is made for children to explore. This does not mean, however, that children are supposed to go wild, do as they please, break things and ravage the place. The science center is an institution produced by adults to promote learning. Although there are no pedagogues moving around in the exhibition, telling visitors how to behave and what to do to learn what is supposed to be learned, the material environment is designed to try to accomplish this. In interviews with personnel at the science center, they mentioned that, when producing their exhibition, they try to direct the learning experience gained there. First and foremost, they try to slow down the pace of the visiting children. They want to prevent children from hurting themselves when running around in the old sugar mill building, but also to slow children down so that they can see the experiments, make them stop and explore, rather than just running past the experimental stations. Mouritsen (2002) describes how, throughout history, various toys and their particular construction have been aimed at directing and controlling children’s many times wild and uncontrolled play activities. For example, Mouritsen (2002: 21) writes that the toy “doll houses” required precision that both calmed and tended to silence the children playing with them and that this was “an antidote to the activities in the wild, physical forms of play”. Similarly, the science center wishes to stimulate the visiting children and wants them to be active. But, there is a “right” kind of active child: the active, competent learner. To direct the visitors, the science center places its experimental stations in something of a labyrinth pattern throughout the exhibition area to try to steer the children toward particular ways of playing – ways of playing that simultaneously enhance learning.

Also, the science center tries to encourage adults to accompany their children during their visits, to help children better understand what they see and to control the children, to remind the children about what kind of place it is, and what one is and is not allowed to do. Nicholson (2005) argues that the school building is a teacher that, along with pedagogues and parents, forms the children. Nicholson (2005: 44) argues that the children are “extremely aware of the symbolic messages which these buildings transmit”. Given this, children may arguably not need parental reminders, because they understand that this is not a playground. Both Lisa and the researcher know that

there are limits to what visiting children are allowed to do, and they affirm this in their conversation. What exactly they are allowed to do in their explorations is nevertheless a matter of negotiation, a negotiation process illuminated by – and, we argue, even made possible through – the choice of participant observation as the method of study. During the visit, Lisa tests the surrounding space, she tests the researcher and her and his relation, trying to determine what she may and may not do.

MAKING THE RESEARCHER USABLE FOR DIFFERENT PRACTICAL PURPOSES

The adult researcher was not only an object that restricted Lisa's actions, but in fact one that Lisa could use. Halfway through the visit, Lisa turned to the researcher and explained that she urgently needed to use the toilet and that the researcher needed to assist her. Although the request made the researcher feel unexpectedly awkward, particularly because Lisa was a young girl, he had no choice but to grant Lisa's request. He had not previously considered that such a situation could occur, that he would have to assume a caring position and had not planned how to act or what to say in such a situation. The plan was to follow children and their families and not children on their own. During such visits with the rest of the family, the parents usually cared for and assisted their children. Lisa positioned herself as dependent and asked the researcher to help her, as her parents were not around to do so. In doing this, Lisa repositioned the researcher. Thus while she presented herself as dependent, she used her competence to push the researcher into meeting her demands. To meet her demands, he had to assume a caring position he was neither prepared for, accustomed to nor comfortable with. While he was acquainted with Lisa's parents, he was still hesitant, aware of the existing public fear of male pedophiles, about how appropriate it was for him – a 40-year-old man – to enter a public toilet alone with a young girl. Quite possibly, the fact that Lisa was a girl made him even more hesitant than he would have been had the child been a boy. He did realize, however, that the situation had to be handled fast, before the 5-year-old had an accident.

The researcher turned off the video camera more or less automatically, without really thinking (Aarsand & Forsberg 2010). Perhaps he made a decision, then and there, that this was not really research, what the research was supposed to focus on, and thus he turned the video camera off, as if the device itself were the research. He himself, of course still an active, on-duty researcher, also made something of a change of position by turning off the camera. Naturally, he could not turn his active eye or observing brain off in a similar manner as he could the video camera, but he did slip out of the researcher position and assumed the responsible, caring adult position. The researcher was not sure what kind of assistance Lisa needed, but he helped her find a toilet. The researcher was not sure whether Lisa could manage the door lock, and he was afraid she might lock herself inside if left on her own. Also, given that he did not know Lisa very well or how competent she was, he was unsure whether Lisa could

really manage using the toilet on her own. Having assumed the caring adult position, although the situation was far from comfortable, he entered the toilet room, turned around and faced the door while Lisa used the toilet. Although the situation felt problematic for the researcher, Lisa's corporal privacy and the researcher's physical presence never appeared to be an issue for her. Having to use the toilet is, of course, a natural part of everyday life and just as natural a part of a visit to a child culture establishment. Similar incidents, where members of our research group had to follow research participants to the toilet, had also taken place in other settings during our fieldwork. Both parents and children thus positioned the accompanying researchers as a trustworthy and natural helping-hand. For researchers, however, this position felt less natural and uncomplicated. Having different adults escort you to the toilet and assist you is part of the everyday, regular routine for younger children in Sweden, most of whom spend their days in daycare institutions. What was less ordinary is probably the fact that the assisting adult acted so hesitantly and that he, instead of actually offering some tangible assistance, positioned himself passively a few steps away and facing the door. Again, Lisa did not seem to think this was problematic or strange. She simply told the researcher she was finished and the researcher, still facing the door, re-assumed the more normal adult, or even parental, position, reminding Lisa to wash her hands before they went out and continued exploring.

The above example was not primarily chosen to highlight the awkward situations researchers conducting participant observations can find themselves in, but to exemplify how the researcher was positioned as a caring helper and used as an extension – a tool that made the visit possible by helping Lisa. It is also a noteworthy example of how the researcher assumed the supportive position and made himself available as a helpful tool. The chosen method, however, participant observation – as it unfolds when a researcher follows a child's visit (without accompanying parents) – is what produces the situation. Another method would not have generated such a situation. Finally, we must not forget the way in which material artifacts – in this case a toilet – as well as the new place – the science center – also play important roles in the episode. While this artifact might not have altered the way in which this particular child's culture experience unfolded, the rest of the visit was highly dependent on it. As mentioned before, Lee (1998) emphasizes the interdependence between agency and dependency, and the behavior of 5-year-old Lisa is a telling example of this. Through her cooperation with the researcher, by getting the researcher to assist her, what could easily pass as an inherently active, competent and autonomous child is enacted. We argue, however, that there is nothing inherent about this; rather it is the result of a process, something that is produced, and that is always produced.

Lisa also used the researcher when she tested the different experiments. In one part of the science center, there is a model of a canal system meandering down a hillside; the canal contains a number of locks. In the lake at the end of the canal, there are

several small plastic boats that can be moved up and down the canal using the lock system. This model is a favorite among visiting children. Some children play with the boats, open and close the locks and other children pump water into the canal system. Lisa was no exception. When Lisa was playing with the canal system, the researcher was positioned a couple of meters away in order to get Lisa and the canal system in the camera's focus. Lisa was pumping water, and as she was doing so she noticed the boats on the other side of the model. While she was busy pumping up water, she did not want to stop (or possibly did not want to let go of the pump and risk some other child taking her place) and walk around the whole canal model to reach the boats, so she asked the researcher: "Can you put one of the boats in?" pointing to the part of the canal where she was standing. Asking the researcher to assist her, Lisa again displayed her dependence. Once again, the researcher lowered the camera, stepped out of the researcher position, and assumed the assisting adult position by putting the boat in the water. In this way, he assisted Lisa in her activity and compensated for the adult person, or another child, who would, on a regular visit, have accompanied a 5-year-old. In this way, the researcher became an extension of the visiting child, a way for her to accomplish a desired interaction with the exhibition, an extension that, at least partly, enabled her to use the exhibition. As we can see in this example, when the researcher did not assume the adult, parental position and asked Lisa if she needed help, Lisa herself asked him to assist her. Furthermore, while Lisa displayed dependence when asking for assistance, the fact that she got the researcher to help her in her endeavor also highlights how this can be used to accomplish a less dependent position.

Again, the researcher was not only used, but also made himself usable by offering his assistance. In another part of the science center, 3-D pictures were hung on the walls. Lisa noticed them while passing. She stopped and pointed to the wall. The 3-D pictures were placed too far up for Lisa to really be able to fully distinguish the images from her position. The designer of the exhibition and the 200 experiments may have had a purpose in placing these pictures in this way. Positioning them too far up on the wall for people Lisa's size to see them could imply they were not intended for children her age. While the designers were absent during Lisa's visit, the material artifacts have been inscribed (Akrich 1992) with ideas about how they are supposed to be used, and what parts of the exhibition are supposed to be used by whom. Sometimes the exhibition is supposed to make action possible, but at other times the constructions are designed to try to steer, and sometimes hinder, users' behavior. However, as for example Evaldsson & Sparrman (2009) suggest, children do not solely use artifacts and material intended for children or children their age in their use and production of culture. Children (as well as other users) often circumvent the designers' intentions. In this case, the designers' ideas did not stop Lisa. Without explanation, Lisa simply looked around for and found a chair, which she could climb up on, after taking off her

shoes on her own initiative, in order to see the pictures from a better angle. While Lisa was interested in and seemed to be amused by the 3-D pictures, at least one of them also scared her a bit. When leaving this part of the exhibition, the researcher, again assuming the adult responsible position, reminded Lisa that she should not forget her shoes that she removed before climbing onto the chair. Lisa was at first hesitant to go back and get her shoes. One of the 3-D pictures on the wall, close to where Lisa's shoes lay on the floor, displayed what Lisa characterized as a monster. Lisa said she was afraid the monster would get her if she got too close. The researcher never questioned Lisa's fear of the monster in the picture, nor did he make any remark about the fictive status of the monster in the picture. He accepted and thus even supported her view of reality, a reality in which monsters exist and can reach out from pictures and grab visiting children (see also Lindgren *et al.* 2014). However, to make it possible for Lisa to get her shoes, and to continue the visit, the researcher positioned himself between Lisa and the monster and said "I'll stand in front of the monster". Lisa, who seemed content with this, said "Now he can't get me" and went and put on her shoes.

TIME TO RE-THINK THE ONTOLOGICAL DISPOSITION?

As we mentioned in the first part of the article, several scholars have argued that the researcher doing ethnography using participant observation is both a scientist working in a laboratory (the field setting) and the ultimate research instrument (Agar 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Walsh 2004). Participant observation is about interaction, but researchers do, as we have mentioned, choose different levels of engagement in the field and when and how to interact. However, the research participants also position the researcher in different ways. In this interactive process, what will eventually be the research material is formed. Collecting research material using participant observation is thus nothing like gathering rocks and placing them in a box (Rabinow 1977). In the present article, we have emphasized the production process. We have used the example of the active, competent child who is capable of autonomous action; we have shown how this ontological notion is co-constructed in the field and in particular how a research method such as participant observation can fuel such processes in different ways.

Different scholars have shown that children and young people are far from passive in their use of culture. For example, Corsaro (1997) shows how young children, in their games and cultural activities with friends, appropriate, take up, adapt and change different ways of talking, expressions and artifacts found in the surrounding society and make these things their own. Similarly, Willis (1990) argues that young people, through their consumption and use of culture, are undertaking a form of symbolic work. Consumption is interpretative work, and when young people work with trying to understand and use the culture they consume, they simultaneously begin to change

its content and appearance. In this process, one can thus find traces of a new production of culture. Willis (1978: 193) even argues that “Objects, artifacts and institutions do not, as it were, have a single valency. It is the act of social engagement with a cultural item which activates and brings out particular meanings”. While all this is true, in our view there has been a tendency in the Social Studies of Childhood studies to oversell children’s competence, capabilities and autonomy in this meaning-making process. Although there have been attempts to widen the perspective (Lee 1998, 2001; Prout 2005), the networks that make the competent and autonomous child possible, thereby producing this child, have still not been elucidated sufficiently. Prout (2005: 64-65) argues that: “The agency of children as actors is often glossed over, taken to be an essential, virtually unmediated characteristic of humans that does not require much explanation”. In the present text, we have described 5-year-old Lisa’s explorations of a science center, undertaken without the rest of her family. Lisa has proven herself to be both competent and capable. However, as we have shown, Lisa’s competence and capability are an outcome that is dependent on and produced in interaction with material artifacts. Moreover, the competent 5-year-old is also produced in interaction with people, primarily the adult researcher who accompanies her on her visit. Moreover, the institution plays a role in this process. As mentioned above, the conception of children as active, competent and capable of autonomous action is fundamental in the part of the world where the present study took place, and science centers, and the way such centers are organized, are certainly colored by this convention. The science center is situated inside a spacious building with open floor-plan solutions where visitors can roam freely. It is secluded from the busy street life and it is designed and prepared to host this kind of visitor. Science centers generally, we argue, design their exhibitions and experiments for competent and capable children who are eager to explore on their own. The establishment facilitates this behavior among visitors. On the whole, however, our findings show that the science center strongly intertwines agency and dependency (Lee 1998) with and through age and materiality.

We ask ourselves, much like Alan Prout does in his book *The Future of Childhood* (2005), whether it is not time to re-think the ontological disposition according to which agency is something the child possesses, something inherent and built into his/her very nature. We believe this is a fair warning – the active, competent child who is capable of autonomous action was produced in our project. This should not be seen, however, as a matter of flawed methodology and something that can or should be corrected by using better-trained researchers or new and improved methods. This is also not something specific to the present study. It is instead the case that no study can ensure an unmediated representation of children (Lee 1998). As mentioned at the beginning of the article, the research object and what is often understood as the research object’s inherent qualities do not exist prior to practices. We need a

Copernican turn when it comes to the ontology of the child. The consequence of autonomy being so highly valued is often a disowning of the fact that children and adults are interdependent and that the surrounding artifacts are all intertwined, thus making these alleged “autonomous” agents possible. As we have shown in the present article, the active, competent child, who is capable of autonomous action, and the researcher are outcomes of the activities in which the child, the researcher, the institutional setting and the material artifacts are produced. Naturally, this notion should affect the way in which we understand the different research results presented. More importantly, however, it is time that this notion also affects the way in which scholars present their results.

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