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DOING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH WITH AND ABOUT CHILDREN IN ROMANIA: METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the involvement of children in social science research projects in Romania. It draws upon the authors' experience of doing anthropological research with and about children. Through ethnographic vignettes, we explore the challenges of involving children in social science research, and we describe the solutions we used to address them. The analysis follows closely different research stages and their methodological and ethical aspects, from negotiating access and obtaining informed consent to issues of confidentiality and intimacy, and establishing connections and communicating with children. We underline the importance of adjusting research methods and instruments in order to fit the child's needs and interests, and to allow for the child to play an active role in the development of the research process. Furthermore, through an overview of the legal framework in Romania and the EU, we show that in Romania there is still an important gap concerning the legal and ethical provisions regarding children involved in research activities.

KEYWORDS

- *Research with children*
- *Methodological challenges*
- *Ethical challenges*
- *Research legal framework*
- *Romania*

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the involvement of children in social science research projects in Romania. It draws upon our own experience of doing anthropological research *with* and *about* children. We have both worked at MA and PhD levels on topics such as the involvement of middle-class children in extracurricular activities, the practice of homeschooling, and the caring for institutionalized children. Moreover, the paper builds upon our own (more often than not failed) attempts to find guidance on methodological and ethical issues in the Romanian literature and legislation. In light of these experiences, we argue that the methodological and ethical challenges these projects raise are not sufficiently addressed within the Romanian academic milieu, and the legal system does not provide adequate guidelines for research *with* and *about* children. Moreover, we claim that the improvement of this situation is necessary because these issues reverberate outside academia. They shed light upon the situation of children's rights and status in contemporary Romania. They provoke and,

simultaneously, substantiate discussions concerning childhood, personhood, children's agency and how these are constructed and experienced.

Our intention is not to propose a definitive methodological and ethical approach to social science research *with* and *about* children in Romania, but to draw attention to the particular issues this type of research raised in our case and to invite further reflection within and without academia upon this sensitive topic. Policy makers, university commissions and researchers in the field of childhood could benefit from such a discussion.

After an overview of the legislation we have consulted, the next sections focus on the challenges we faced, the solutions we found and the reflections the research process provoked. The analysis follows closely different research stages and their methodological and ethical aspects, from negotiating access and obtaining informed consent to issues of confidentiality and intimacy, and establishing connections and communicating with children.

We began reflecting upon the issue of child research in Romania while working on our MA and PhD theses on childhood experiences. One of the authors has also worked as a teaching assistant and a teacher of English in various private educational institutions, while the other has volunteered in various projects involving children. Thus, we have a combined experience of more than 8 years, time in which we learned and gained insight from directly working with children from 2 to 18 years of age. We have been exposed to bits and pieces of their everyday life, and have had access to discussions about how they interpret their experiences. With this in mind, we structured this paper as a selective collection of research practices and reflections from our fieldworks involving children in Bucharest and their families, between 2012 and 2017. We use data gathered through various methods and instruments: semi-structured and in-depth interviews with children, parents, teachers and therapists; materials produced by and collected from children – weekly routine journals, photos and operationalized drawings[1]; participant and direct observation in contexts ranging from educational institutions, state run institutions of care to private home, playgrounds and homeschooling camps; content analysis on data collected from forums and online groups discussing topics related to family, education and childhood. Furthermore, we link our own experiences with the legal framework through an analysis of documents at the national and EU level.

2. Legislation regarding the involvement of children in (social) research

The legal aspects surrounding the process of research were a major subject of concern in our endeavour. When we first started working with children, we realised there was a void regarding the legal and ethical provisions concerning children involved in research activities in Romania. We point out the importance of such legal and ethical provisions for three reasons: one is related to the harmful effects that such a research might have on vulnerable individuals such as children; the other concerns our own

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1   Basically a piece of paper divided in 6 or more boxes where children could draw about different moments from their daily routine, free-time, school work and so on.

experience of embarking in such a research project and finding ourselves wihout guidance from the university ethical commission, nor from legal documents; the last concerns the often limited acces to academic publications that address such issues due to their lack of presence in Romanian libraries or the high costs of purchasing.

Therefore, in the next pages we will try to offer a clearer picture of the legal framework in Romania and the EU that regulates children's position in research projects. We follow aspects that relate to the participation of children in research; the conditions of their participation; children's informed consent; the involvement of children's representatives or care takers in the process of research; children's rights to express their views; confidentiality; the dissemination of results; the risks of involving children in research.

Romania has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child through Law no. 18 of 27/09/1990, by which the basics of the rights and protection of children were set in post-socialist Romania. Although the child is seen as immature from a physical and mental point of view, and therefore in need of special care and special legal protection, his freedom of expression is of utmost importance. Moreover, parents or legal guardians have the main responsibility for the development of the child, and all of their actions should have the best interests of the child as basic premise. However, there is no specific mention of involving children in research.

After 1990, a number of emergency ordinances and some government orders were given in respect to children's rights (Tofan and Batculescu: 2013), but we had to wait for law no. 272 from 2004, for a comprehensive law concerning "*the protection and promotion of children's rights*". This law lays down some guidelines for the protection of children's rights and tackles a series of issues which can relate to the involvement of children in research.

Here, the notion of 'best interests of the child' is clearly stated, and supposed to „*prevail in all endeavours and decisions that concern children, taken by public authorities or by authorized private institutions, as in court cases.*" (Law no. 272/2004, Art. 2, line 3). Line 4 of the same article states that in all the decisions, actions, or measures regarding the child, institutions or authorities are obliged to involve the family. Article 6 makes a case for respecting and guaranteeing children's right to dignity and opinion (points g and h). Point l stipulates that interpretation of each legal norm regarding the rights of the child, should be done in correlation with all the regulations in this field, thus underlining our need to explore multiple documents on the matter of children and research.

Moreover, article 22, line 1 states that „*the child has the right for the protection of his public image, and that of his intimate, private and family life*". Although indirectly, these ideas concern consent and confidentiality of children involved in research.

The children's right to free speech is clearly stated, along with their freedom to be informed and share information, to be listened to, consulted, and the parents' responsibility to provide them with information, explanations and advice, while also not limiting[2] the child's freedom of speech (art. 23, 24). These points can be linked to helping the child understand the consequences of his participation in a research, and also his involvement in the process of designing the research itself.

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2   Except in cases expressed by law - this is important as we will later show one of these cases.

In the republished version of the law (2014), a section in chapter VI concerns the protection of the child against abuse, neglect, exploitation, and any other form of violence. Article 110 states that: *„the child has the right to protection against any form of exploitation"* (line 1); and that *„the public institutions and authorities, according to their attributions, adopt specific reglementations and apply corresponding measures for the prevention of, among others: (h) the exploitation of the child within research endeavours or scientific experiments"* (line 2, row h). However, neither in the original form, nor in the republished form of the law, do we find details of what counts as exploitation in such instances or sanctions for this particular form of exploitation. Furthermore, the above mentioned row h, line 2, of article 110 of the republished law no. 272/2004, is the only specific detail concerning the involvement of children in research.

Given the fact that one of the authors' topics of research concerned institutionalized children, we also explored the legal aspects regarding this particular area. According to Government Decision no. 1018/2002, any information about foster children or children under state care[3] will be shared only with the approval of the management of the institution in charge (art. 3). Although in this law there are very strict regulations about the protection of the child's privacy, there is no specific mentioning of the involvement of institutionalized children in research. Moreover, it would seem that this is one of the cases mentioned in article 23, line 4 of Law 272/2004 which states that *„parents cannot limit the minor child's right to freedom of speech, only in the cases expressed by law"*, for here any decision concerning the child is made by the authorities.

Other legal documents of interest are Government Decision no. 860 from 2008 and Government Decision no. 1113 from 2014. Both documents have to do with the approval of the national strategy in the field of protection and promotion of the child's rights and of the operational plan for the implementation of that strategy.

The first one, no. 860/2008, pertains to the 2008-2013 national strategy concerning the protection of children's rights. It includes issues that might be connected with research endeavours like the respecting of children's opinions and their participation in all the issues that concern them (point 2.5), and the need for *„the elaboration of clear procedures concerning the exercise of children's right to solicit and receive information"* (point 2.5.2). Furthermore, this is the first document in which we find distinct ideas about *„the initiation of the making and promotion of a code of conduct containing the ethical principles which should be respected by specialists who interact with children in their activity."* (point 2.5.3) However, there is still no specific mention about doing research with children, and, even if the deadline for the making of such a code was the 3rd trimester of 2009, we couldn't find any document relating to this matter.

The second one, Government Decision no. 1113/2014, deals with the same national strategy, but for the 2014 - 2020 period. This is a very important document because, for the first time, we find data coming from social science researches about children[4] used as argumentative data, as facts upon which policy decisions should or are going to be made. However, if in the previous implementation plan there was point

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3   Translation of *„copil aflat in plasament".*

4   These researches are mostly done by international and local NGOs that have as their main activity the promotion of children's rights - i.e. HHC Romania 2012; Salvati Copiii, 2009; Unicef, 2012

no. 2.5.3, relating to the realisation of a code of conduct for the specialists who interact with children, in this plan, this is no longer present. Also, there is no mentioning of involving children in research.

Given the fact that the dissemination of social science research can have important effects on the people studied, especially the most vulnerable ones like children, it is important to be cautious about how this is done. Relevant on this aspect is law no. 677/2001 on the protection of individuals with regard to processing of personal data and the free circulation of these data. The law contains some information regarding anonymity, the obligation for informed consent, and the need to consider the norms that regulate scientific research (art. 4, 5 and chapter IV). However, there is no clear mention about children, or about social science research.

In what concerns the norms that regulate scientific research, it is the law of education (1/2011) that stipulates the universities have autonomy and responsibility to include in their university charter an ethics and deontological code[5] (art. 124, line 1, row c) and an Ethics Commission (supervising any university ethics related issues). Still, there is no specific mentioning of the involvement of children in social science research.

More to the point, Government Ordinance no. 57/2002, concerning scientific research and technological development, stresses the importance given to research by the government, and the need to respect the principles of professional ethics (art. 3, 5). Yet, there is no further reference of an ethics code, or about doing research with children.

Deepening our search, we find Law 206/2004 concerning good conduct in scientific research, technological development and innovation. The norms included in this law should be detailed in an *„ethics code, as stipulated in law no. 319/2003 concerning the statute of personnel working in research/development, as well as in the ethics codes for specific areas [...]"* (art. 1, line 2). However, law no. 319/2003 only mentions central authorities' obligation to develop such a code (art.38).

Returning to Law 206, some important aspects are worth mentioning here like the respecting of human dignity and the compliance with confidentiality requirements. The only ideas about involving children in research are found at article 12 concerning the ethical evaluation of research projects. Thus, in clinical trials which involve *„people who can not give their consent, especially children, pregnant women, healthy volunteers"* (Art. 12, point a), projects will be verified for their compliance with "the general ethical principles". Children are considered persons that cannot consent. Additionally, this stipulation only refers to the involvement of children in medical trials, and the „general ethical principles" remain a vague notion. The rest of the law does not clarify the position of children that might be involved in other types of research projects, or the steps a researcher needs to follow when dealing with minors.

An amendment (Government Ordinance 28/2011) to Law 206/2004 solved this conundrum in a quite original way: repealing the entire article referring to ethical committees checking on projects involving clinical trials and tests on children. Summarizing, the law pertaining to good conduct in scientific research does not bring

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5   Among the mandatory issues that must be included in this code, there is no reference to children or their involvement in research (see art. 30, line 1, points a, b, c).

insight or clarification into the involvement of children in social science research. Nevertheless, article 2 of the same law states that *„research and development staff have responsibilities according to the relevant legislation and codes of professional ethics in research on human subjects, in the use of animals for experiments and in the protection of the environment; good conduct in research and development shall be ensured in accordance with the international regulations in the field, the legislation of the European Union, and the ethical rules of its scientific research programs"* (lines 4 & 5).

This is the connection to the European Union's legislation in matters relating to scientific research. One point of departure in this path of inquiry is the Commission's Recommendation[6] on the *European Charter for Researchers* and the *Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* (2005). It provides that the principles concerning research stated at the EU level should be integrated into the national regulatory framework. However, when it comes to ethical principles: *„researchers should adhere to the recognised ethical practices and fundamental ethical principles appropriate to their discipline(s) as well as to ethical standards as documented in the different national, sectoral or institutional Codes of Ethics".* So it seems that the responsibility is passed back to individual disciplines and to national Codes of Ethics. Furthermore, there is no mentioning of doing research with children throughout the *European Charter for Researchers*, which, at the time of writing this paper, had been endorsed[7] by 10 universities and research centres in Romania.

In the EU Framework of Law for Children's Rights (2012) we find the most important legal documents that regulate the protection of children like the Treaty on European Union, the Treaty of Lisbon, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights, and the European Social Charter. While these documents contain aspects already discussed regarding children's rights, there are no specific mentions of the involvement of children in research. However, Recommendation 9 in the EU Framework of Law for Children's Rights underlines the importance of social science research done with children, and the ensuing crucial insights for their situation. It is also argued that children themselves should be involved in these researches, although it is not very clear in what way (i.e. in the design of the research, in the process of gathering data etc.).

At EU level there are other types of documents which are not legally binding but which relate to research in a more direct way, and which address the implications of doing research with children. Some examples are: *Ethics for researchers - Facilitating Research Excellence in FP7*[8] (2013), the *European Textbook on Ethics in Research*[9] (2010), the *Guidance Note for Researchers and Evaluators of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*[10]

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6 Although Recommendations are non-binding documents without legal force, they do show the general directions of the EU, which the states should follow.

7 https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/charter/declaration-endorsement#show_Romania

8 This document was meant for researchers who are preparing an application to receive funding from the European Union.

9 This document is a textbook *„designed for use in the training of researchers and research ethics committee members throughout Europe and beyond"* (p. 7).

10 This document is meant *„to provide applicants and evaluators of Social Sciences and Humanities research projects with advice and practical guidance on dealing with the ethical aspects of Social Sciences and Humanities research"* (p. 3).

(2010), the *RESPECT Code of Practice: An EU Code of Ethics for Socio-Economic Research*[11] (2004). Some of the relevant ideas from these documents include: special attention is needed when children are involved in research; the importance given to matters of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality; the findings might cause harm (i.e. revealing a fact about a child which otherwise would not have been known); in case of vulnerable subjects such as children, safeguards for the minimizing of any inconvenience should be written into the research protocol; measures taken for protection of the researcher also (i.e. to protect her from false accusations); the issue of the ethical guidelines used by review boards which are not well suited for social sciences and humanities research, but rather for the medical/bio-medical ones; the dynamic, progressive and developmental nature of research methods used in social sciences which makes the anticipation of risks or ethical issues very difficult (i.e. ethnography can span over months or even years); the necessity and importance of parents/legal representatives' and children's informed consent; when is a child able to understand the consequences of his participation in the research?; the need for suitable strategies for informing children (i.e. pictures, video, audio - fitted for children's age).

Accordingly, at the EU level, non-binding legal guidelines more clearly state details concerning the involvement of children in research. In this context, however, a research done by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) shows that Romania is not the only country in the EU with *„no clear regulation about parental consent and age groups"*[12] when it comes to children's participation in research.

Returning to the Romanian national context, we have seen that the responsibility for the managing of ethical issues in research falls upon the Ethics Commission of each university or research institute (Law no. 1/2011, section 5, art. 306). This commission follows an Ethical Code adopted by the university senate, which is part of the university's charter. Therefore, we have searched for specific mentionings of the involvement of children in research in the Ethical Codes of the most important state run and private universities in Romania[13]. There was no reference to children and their participation in research projects.

To conclude this section of the article, we argue that the image we get from the Romanian legal framework and from the Ethical Codes of research institutions, is one with very limited specific aspects relating to the involvement of children in social science research. However, as we have shown throughout this section, we do find multiple details that relate indirectly to our topic of inquiry[14] (i.e. the necessity and conditions of children's informed consent), but there aren't any clear procedures of how these should be applied to a research context.

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11   This document contains a synthesised and analysed version of multiple existing codes of practice from national and international professional groups - it is more of an *aspirational* code.

12   The other countries are Spain, France, Belgium, Denmark, Austria, Slovakia, Estonia.

13   University of Bucharest, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration Bucharest, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu; Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, West University of Timişoara, Ovidius University of Constanta, Transilvania University of Braşov; Spiru Haret University Bucharest, Romanian-American University Bucharest, Titu Maiorescu University Bucharest, Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University Bucharest, The Romanian Academy.

14   The general regulations concerning human and children's rights.

To sum up, the need for special safeguards for children is acknowledged in non-binding national and international legal guidelines. Moreover, social science research is regarded as an important source of information for the process of policy making[15]. Notwithstanding, there is still a gap concerning the actual provisions for the protection of the child and that of the researcher throughout the process of research.

3. Challenges, solutions and reflections

The field of childhood studies has developed considerably since its first steps with Darwin (1872, 1877), Piaget (1926, 1928, 1932), Mead (1930), Aries (1962) and Lloyd deMause (1974). Now there are numerous international research centres, study programmes concerning childhood and youth, academic journals dedicated to these subjects. The current debates address the relevance of children as social actors (Corsaro: 2011, Christensen: 2004, Greene and Hogan: 2005), offering examples of and arguments for children as participants in social research (Hirschfeld: 2002, Christensen and James: 2000, Christensen and O'Brien: 2003, Mayall: 1994, Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig: 2009). These authors argue that children are active agents in the processes that define their experience of everyday life and, therefore, should also be treated as such in research that focuses on them. They also deal with the specific problems that may arise while doing research with children: the methodological kit and whether and how this differs from the methods used in the studies with and about adults (Mayall: 1994, Christensen and O'Brien: 2003, Greene and Hogan: 2005); the reliability of children as respondents and active participants in research (Hirschfeld: 2002, Christensen and James: 2000); instances of delicate choices regarding confidentiality, intimacy and power relations between the researcher and the child respondent (Greene and Hogan: 2005, Corsaro: 2001); the search for trust and open communication (Corsaro: 2001, Mandell: 1991); and, more importantly, ethical aspects in social research with children (Morrow & Richards: 1996, Hill: 2005, Alderson: 1995, 2008, Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

In Romania, research *about* children and childhood experiences is still limited (i.e. Roman: 2015, Jigău: 2008, Bonchiş: 2011), while anthropological and sociological research *with* children is even scarcer (i.e. Cojocaru: 2008). However, there are studies in other related fields like the history of childhood in Romania (Roman: 2015 or Majuru: 2006), about education and pupils (Mihalache & Rados: 2015, Ţoc: 2016, Jigău: 2008), family and childhood (Mihalache: 2016, Bonchiş: 2011, Stanciu: 2008, Iluţ: 2005). Moreover, there is a great deal of childhood related literature that is rooted in pedagogy, psychology and childhood development (Cuciureanu: 2014, Irimescu: 2006, Mihăilescu & Butoi: 2000). In addition, there are two MA programmes in Cluj and Iasi focused on children's rights[16].

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15 See discussion on page 5 about Government Decision no. 1113/2014 where data coming from social sciences is used as argumentative data.

16 For more details please see: http://www.fssp.uaic.ro/departamente/sociologie-si-asistenta-sociala/specializari/master/masterat-european-de-protectia-drepturilor-copilului and http://admitere.ubbcluj.ro/ro/master/facultati/sociologie_asistenta/.

However consistent this academic corpus may be, in the most part, children are not involved as participants in the research, although some of the authors cited recognise their agency or potential for agency in society. Moreover, among these studies, there are little to no specific self-standing works focusing on methodologies and challenges of working with children in social research. While there are some mentions (Iluț: 2016, Cojocaru: 2013, Chelcea: 2004) about the particularities of doing research with children, they are offered rather brief, in the form of theoretical guidelines, with little exemplification or empirically based arguments, and most often from a developmental perspective.

There is also market driven research, mostly done *about* children with data collected from their parents, through internet-applied questionnaires, with little to no interaction or connection to the children and their experiences[17]. There are some exceptions though, with children participating in focus groups or interviews along with their parents[18]. However, in market research, the focus is rather on consumption than on children's perspective and experiences relating to other subjects. The volume of market research done with children suggests that children are acknowledged as agents of consumption, and are targeted as such by commercial activity. However, these studies, along with those coming from Romanian academia, scarcely study and recognise children as agents in their own lives, and in the world they share with adults, or acknowledge them as sources of relevant information in social studies or policy making.

Having the above mentioned context in mind, in the following sections, we will approach the specific challenges that social science research *with* and *about* might raise, exemplify them using excerpts from our own fieldworks with children and provide a detailed account of the solutions we came up either on our own, or drawing inspiration from international childhood studies.

4. Getting access to and consent from children

While studying middle-class children's involvement in extracurricular activities and working as a teaching assistant in a private language centre (LC) in Bucharest, one of the authors had to figure out how to properly contact and obtain informed consent from his interlocutors. Three quarters of the subjects were selected through the LC. The age group targeted was between 6 and 12 years old. At that time, although there were still no clear legal or ethical provisions, he considered the children's consent needed to be accompanied by their parents' or caretakers' consent. Therefore, the obvious challenge and extra work (unlike working with adult subjects) was to pass the gatekeepers – the parents/caretakers and the language centre's direction. He started

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17   Some examples can be found at: http://www.revista-piata.ro/Exclusiv_Piata__Primul_studiu_privind_comportamentul_de_cumparare_a_jucariilor__realizat_de_Exact_C_C-id11423.html or http://www.quantix.ro/

18   Some examples can be found at: http://www.researchromania.ro/2016/10/studiu-bold-by-lowe-group-copiii-din-romania-petrec-peste-5-ore-pe-zi-pe-retelele-sociale/ and http://www.isensesolutions.ro/#!/children-and-technology

by formulating a letter of invitation that he would then offer to children's parents/caretakers when coming to pick them up. It took about a month to negotiate with the institution's direction in order to agree upon the formulation of that letter, and the people he would be allowed to invite to participate in the study. Finally, he was only able to invite the children he was working with in his classes, thus limiting the pool of potential subjects to 44 persons out of about 500.

The letter was providing a concise description of the project and invited the parents and their children to engage in a more detailed discussion regarding the implications of their participation to the project. At this point, he would also present the parents and children with informed consent forms regarding three aspects: parents agreeing to their participation, parents agreeing to their children's participation, and children agreeing to their participation to the study. While verbal consent is usually admitted, especially in anthropological research (ASA: 2011, AAA: 2012), he considered it necessary that both the parents and children would sign a printed consent form and keep a copy of their own, thus always having essential information about the research process, about himself as a researcher, and his host institution. Moreover, the consent forms eased his relation with the participants: for the parents it meant a reassurance of his honesty and a means of setting proper expectations; for the children, the forms represented their first contact as researcher and subject, a way of breaking the ice towards discovering each-other in new roles. It also reassured them they have total freedom of choice, that they are in control and that they can refuse to continue at any point.

Even when children could not properly read or entirely understand the meaning of some words in the form, with the help of their parents, they got to a departure point when children asked questions about the study, their rights, the job of researcher/anthropologists.

> „Researcher: It says here that our conversation would be confidential.
> Boy (11): Mhm…
> R: Do you know what that means?
> B: No…not really.
> R: It means that I will not tell anybody what we discuss here.
> B: And how will you write your project if you cannot tell anyone what you hear?
> R: When I write about it, I will use another name so that people would not know you said this or that. Not even your parents. Do you agree with that?
> B: Ok."

A complementary example comes from the other author's attempts to get access to institutionalized children living in state run institutions of care called 'family type apartments'. These are flats with 3 or 4 bedrooms, usually located at the outskirts of the city, in which 4 to 8 children live. Their age ranges from 4 to 18 years old. They are taken care of by 4 to 6 'social educators', 'referents', 'counsellors' or 'night-carers' who work in 8 to 12 hours shifts.

As in the previous case, approval from the institution (from now on

DGASPC[19]) in charge was needed in order to reach the children. In this particular case, the institution was also the legal representative. Thus, the first step was filling requests to several different DGASPC branches, which detailed the purpose of the research, how it was to be conducted, and the possible risks and outcomes. It was also mentioned that, as with any kind of long term social research, the issues that were to be approached might change over time[20], depending on the findings and the interactions during the fieldwork. The author also stated the need to get approval from the children themselves. Moreover, having gained some experience from working with children in these apartments as a volunteer for several months prior to the research, the author included the fact that there are many risks that cannot be accounted for from the beginning. The reason for this is that in such apartments live up to 8 children, sometimes having considerably different ages, interests, and they can distract one another, or they can even starts fights. In addition to this, some of them are treated for supposed various psychological issues.

After waiting for several months, and multiple phone calls requesting meetings to discuss the research, most of the solicitations got rejections, except one. However, based on discussions with the DGASPC representatives, the agreement was that the direction was to be changed from doing research *with* children to doing research *about* children. So the author had to adjust his research topic and design in light of the new situation. More precisely, the research topic changed to caring *for* children and the personnel working in family type apartments, putting thus the children on a secondary level. As we have shown in the legal aspects section, no information about the children under state care can be given without the approval of the director of the institution in charge. Consequently, the children themselves were not asked about their participation in this research.

This is similar to Solberg's (1996) experience of doing research with children. This study refers to a research carried out in an educational institution in Norway where the school management did not consider to ask children about their involvement, thus denying their right to participate. So a new question rises in this case: can a child take part in a research on his own agreement, without the consent of his carers?

Therefore, with respect to access, the challenge concerning research *with* children is to overcome the extra effort brought about by the gatekeepers and intermediaries. Although not specifically implied by the Romanian law, parents and caretakers cannot be eluded from the process of obtaining consent from the children, and their influence should be taken into consideration. If the research site and process also includes an institution where children are enrolled, the researcher needs to reach mutual grounds with said institution for the development of the research. Third parties are bound to appear frequently while doing research with children, especially in what regards ethical matters.

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19 Direcția Generală de Asistență Socială și Protecția Copilului – The General Direction for Social Assistance and Child Protection.

20 One of the goals was also to involve the children in the design of the research.

5. Confidentiality and Intimacy

Social science research, irrespective of instruments or methods, can bring about sensitive issues concerning the child and/or his caretakers. Among the most sensitive aspects of our research was preserving the child's intimacy and handling matters of confidentiality.

During one of the author's research on middle class children and extracurricular activities in Bucharest, he met a family who initially agreed to their daughter participating in an individual, recorded, confidential interview. The subject of his research sparked the parents' interest in what happened in their child's life, how she experienced education, childhood, time and space in their little apartment in northern Bucharest. They repeatedly suggested they were not spending enough time with their daughter, nor did they find enough opportunities to approach the above mentioned matters with her. Consequently, after the interview, the parents tried to convince the researcher to give them the recording, so they would *„be more in touch with their daughter"* (father). The parents had also signed an informed consent form beforehand, which clearly stated the confidentiality of their daughter's interview. Furthermore, the author had explained and reassured their daughter that their discussion would remain private, even from her parents. The solution out of that delicate situation was to talk to all three of them and state clearly that the recording will only go to their daughter, if she wanted it. Also, she could do whatever she wanted with it. She was the only one to decide whether the parents would listen to the interview or not. The researcher also reassured the parents that they would receive the final results of the research, which would offer them a broad picture of a childhood experience quite similar to their daughter's.

A more difficult situation occurred when parents insisted on them being present during the interviewing of their children. Handling the confidentiality matter was out of the question in this case. The presence of the parents meant that their children's answers were devoid of the little secrets they shared in private conversations: like the minor deviations from house rules of which *"they [the parents] shouldn't know about"* (girl, 9), those which happened *"when mom goes shopping"* (girl, 8). It was a form of social desirability that children expressed towards their parents and which manifested as a sort of self-censorship. The parents' presence also influenced the researcher. First, in his behaviour towards the child: he too felt the need to change or avoid some questions that would have put the child in a difficult position of talking about something he/she found funny or interesting but which was frowned upon by the parents; and second in his ability/necessity to focus on more than one person at a time.

It is worth mentioning here that in contrast to this researcher's experience, other studies (Koocher & Keith-Speigel: 1994; Hill: 2005) have shown that, depending on the research subject and on the emotional context, the presence of a parent or similar adult figure can offer the child a boost in confidence and safety, helping them to open up and speak freely.

The other author's research with institutionalized children living in family type apartments brought about different challenges regarding confidentiality and intimacy. In this case, the author mostly used participant observation as a method. He helped the children with their homework, and did chores around the house whenever needed. So there were no recorded interviews and only verbal consent was obtained from

children. Protecting the child's intimacy and the information they shared with the researcher in private conversations was not much of an issue for their caretakers. Living with other children in an institution, in shared rooms, under constant watch from the personnel, with cameras filming the recreational area, already made the intimacy of the children a very limited and delicate issue. Surprisingly, the challenges came from the caretakers themselves, who often shared with the author intimate informations about the children's lives. This was done in casual conversations, without the researcher asking for them, often with the children present. This actually increased the tensions between the researcher, the children, and the caretakers, and made the process of research even more difficult. It also affected the relation of trust the researcher had previously tried to build privately with the children.

These examples show that how researchers handle aspects of confidentiality, intimacy or power relations with children participants can dramatically affect the process of research, and can have unexpected, even harmful effects on the children.

6. Connection

The presence of the intermediary does not only cast an influence on the interview development and on the aspects of confidentiality. It also implies a different manner for keeping in touch. During our the ethnographic fieldworks with children, we needed at least two or three meetings for carrying an in-depth interview, or retrieve some other instruments like journals or drawings; or multiple encounters spanning over months in the case of participant observation.

One of the author's experience with middle-class children and their parents consisted, at first, in arranging these meetings with or through the parents and not directly with the main subjects, the children. Apart from making communication complicated and cumbersome, this approach also translated in missing an important opportunity to build or consolidate a relationship with the child. It eluded the small talk, the chance to ask banal questions on the phone or through online social platforms, to express a gist of anxiety for the next meeting. In order to address this issue, he considered it best to privately ask the child, during the first meeting, where and when to see each other again, and then, together, present the solution to the parents. Instead of treating the child as a mere subject of research, he tried to empower them, to give them the opportunity to choose and negotiate, to make them feel safe and in control of the situation.

While this issue is age-sensitive in case of the children, he found that it also depended on parents' openness and their mutual trust relationship. During his other fieldwork among homeschoolers in Bucharest, this researcher met several families who openly decided to take themselves out as intermediaries in his relation with the children: *„You can come and visit and talk to them anytime you want."* (mother of teenagers – girl and boy – 12, respectively 16 years old); *„They can handle it. You decide together what you need to do."* (mother of boy and girl - 11, respectively 14 years old). On some of these incursions in the life of homeschoolers, he was even left alone in the house with two teenagers (11 and 14 years old) to continue a previously started interview; or he was offered the chance to engage in participant observation with an 8 year old and

his 3 year old brother, both immersed in remodelling their parents' workshop[21]. Only after the spur of the moment had passed did he realise the potential of an accident happening. What would the solution have been? He was not explicitly entrusted with taking care of the children, but as an adult among children, he implicitly bore that responsibility. Although these situations raise important questions about safety, they also offered the opportunity to actively engage with the children, to do something together and have a fluid conversation about subjects which have previously been avoided or vaguely addressed.

However open some of the parents may have been, the author always felt the need to keep every intention of his transparent to them. For example, even though in the two cases mentioned above, mothers suggested contacting the children directly for any issues regarding the research, he always included their mothers, visibly, in the online conversations he had with the children.

The other author's work with institutionalized children posed similar issues. Each visit had to be preceded by phonecalls to the caretakers. Each time, he would also ask to speak with the child he was helping with homework that day, to see if he was available. The caretakers would often leave them about their business, as they were glad they had one less child to care for. Similarly, the responsibility was passed, as tacit agreement, to the researcher.

What we would point out, therefore, is that a good part of the parents/ caretakers, showed explicit interest in managing the relation between the children and the researcher, playing their roles as active gatekeepers. Others tried to offer a more independent environment, but there was an underlying need for calming their safety concerns and satisfying their curiosity. Where children were older, in their teens, caretakers were more flexible about allowing the researcher a separate, independent relation with them. However, even in these cases, as in all others, the key element was building trust – being transparent, consistent, setting clear limits, promising only what can be done and most of all, being persistent without putting too much pressure on sensitive issues. Additionally, very often when working with children, the researcher may find himself bearing a responsibility not previously accounted for, and for which he has no legal safety nets.

7. Communication

Building trust and, on its basis, a relationship that encourages children to be comfortable is essential in establishing a working communication process. Some studies (Fine and Sandstrom: 1988, Mahon et al: 1996, Ireland and Holloway: 1996) discuss the possibility that children participants are less reliable or competent than adults and therefore, the results of a research with minors are questionable. Granted, communication can be more difficult with children, but in our work as researchers, kindergarten teacher and volunteer, we found that this is a mere stage, it is the beginning of a relationship. After setting the common grounds on which the interaction will develop, it is necessary to find the proper language and the topics that fuel the child's interest in the discussion.

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21 They were building a small tool shelf and drilling holes in concrete to hang it on the wall.

For example, while working with homeschoolers, one of the authors met a ten-year old girl who was very talkative – so talkative he could not insert any question in the conversation/monologue. The first visit lasted two hours in which she mainly talked about Minecraft, a computer game that allowed her to create a world of her own, of which she needed to take care of every day. He tried to tell her that he was interested in her homeschooling story, but it did not work – whenever he would ask a question about this, she would fall silent for a few seconds, look dreamy, and then resume showing him her tablet with the game on. At that moment, the girl was not interested in the research project or his person more than a stranger would listen and be mildly curious. They agreed on a future meeting and about her writing a week's diary, and taking photos of important things and places in her life.

When they met two weeks later, the researcher had picked up on Minecraft and was prepared to ask some questions he thought were interesting. However, things started the same way. Only after an hour of her Minecraft monologue, did he managed to bring about the subject of the pictures and the diary. She had not kept a diary, but was very eager to show the pictures she took. This started a conversation that rapidly brought consistent details about her home, her experience as a homeschooler, and her relation with her parents and her younger brother. Therefore, the problem was not in the fact that she could not be articulate about what interested the researcher. The issue was that, at first, he did not manage to make his object of study to be of interest to her also. This was later achieved by diversifying the instruments used in collecting the data, thus tapping into the resourcefulness of different means of communication.

This diversification of instruments was also used by the author in his fieldwork with middle-class children and extracurricular activities. In trying to better understand the children's view on time, free time, play and work, the author asked the children to make drawings about their routine and their free time in the form of an operationalized drawing. When analysing the collected data and comparing the interviews to the drawings, he realised that most children drew free time differently to the way they verbalised it: while all the interviewed children verbally suggested in one way or another that extra-curricular activities are part of their free time, when drawing, only one child included a scene about an extracurricular activity.

Another example comes from the other author's fieldwork in state run institutions of care for children. At first he got the same problems in discussing his research topic with the participants. Either the subject was too vague, too difficult, or simply not interesting. He therefore chose not to ask any particular questions to children about his subject of study, but to engage in any conversation or situation that might arise. This brought about many issues which at first might have seemed unrelated to his topic, but as the time passed by, they helped not only in establishing a working relationship with the children, but also in building a better nuanced picture of the environment.

These situations point out that aside from minor issues of articulation, the main aspects in question are the choice for the proper means of communication and the negotiation of what is of interest for the children. These challenges can be overcome in ways quite similar to those used in research with adults, and in fact, this is the point we want to make: children, as well as adults, are persons. They may not

have the same depth or length of life experience, but they are human, they can think and communicate what they think. The researcher's utmost aim is to be open towards searching for the proper means of communication in each case particularly. That means choosing instruments carefully, adapting them as the fieldwork unfolds, and last but not least, focus on how the object of the study can also be translated into an object of interest for the participants of the research project.

On the same issue of communication, as Mayall (2003) points out, there are accounts that interviews with children would be inconclusive ultimately because of "recycling parent talk". However, Mayall (2003) herself and Christensen (2004) dispute these claims and suggest that even adults are subject to such a practice by forming an opinion (and thus recycling) on what they hear around them. In our interactions with children, we encountered arguments that sustain both claims. For example, when asking children how they felt about going to extracurricular activities, most of them could do the introspection exercise and produce a clear, coherent answer. However, when trying to find out what their opinion was about the purpose of these activities in the future, they partly recycled their parents' arguments and ideas on this topic.

We argue that this is a challenge for research with children as much as it is with adults. Triangulation of sources is always a good solution that allows being aware and reducing this kind of bias when interpreting the data. At the same time, the recycled talk can be used as a resource in observing the family dynamics, the statute of the children in the family and how important subjects are discussed together with the parents, when the child is allowed to take independent decisions, and when they are rather the recipient of an explanation for a decision already taken by the parents.

It is also relevant to discuss here about the physical context of the research. This aspect is important from at least three considerations: firstly, new spaces/places can be distractive, can disrupt focus from the interview topic because of too many stimuli that may be new to the child (Punch: 2002). Secondly, other authors (Ennew and Boyden: 1997, Hill: 2005) argue that it is preferable for children to be in their comfort zone, in a familiar place that enhances the feeling of safety and being in control. Thirdly, and also essential, is what each particular place brings about in terms of the child's autonomy.

One example comes again from the fieldwork on extracurriculars. One of the families agreed to take part in the research project, but only allowed the researcher to meet their daughter in a public restaurant, across the street to their home, and in the presence of the mother. While the place was not necessarily new to the child, it was odd for girl, first of all because they were there to talk and not to eat, like everybody else did. The noise level was uncontrollable, and there were often shouts or laughter from the children around, that visibly distracted the girl from their conversation. Most importantly, however, was the fact that her mother was present, since it was a public place and the girl was 10 years old. This context made the conversation difficult and awkward at times, with the girl trying to offer an answer that would cover the question, but not give in details that might have dismayed her mother, or with the mother answering instead of the child.

In a strong connection to this topic is the issue regarding children's attention span. While there are studies arguing for rather short attention spans in young

children (Punch: 2002, Lange & Mierendorff: 2009), in our fieldwork, we found that it is not necessarily the time-span of focus that is important, but the child's interest and involvement in the research topic. For example, in the case of working with institutionalized children, one of the authors has attempted many times to bring about the questions of care and morality which were his interest, but with no success. Most of the children, depending on the age, were rather interested in their mundane activities, and in their friendships. Thus, the author has to change his approach, focusing more on the relationships that children had with their caretakers, in the particular moments in which those relationships became relevant.

Thus, finding a bridge for communication and establishing an emotional connection are far more relevant on a long term basis. Moreover, choosing the proper environment and adapting instruments to fit the context and the child, are essential to gaining and maintaining the focused involvement of the child.

8. Conclusions

Social and anthropological research with children in Romania has been constantly evolving in the past few years. However, the methodological and ethical guidelines are lacking substance and vivid examples. The legal framework concerning this subject offers little support to the researchers.

In this context, delicate or dilemmatic issues are bound to appear and we have tried to illustrate some of them, focusing on four thematic aspects. We have discussed how getting access to and informed consent from children can represent both extra-work for the researcher who deals with the gate-keepers, and a manner of empowering children as participants in research, while also reaffirming their rights as persons. Confidentiality and intimacy are strongly related to the aspect of consent, and as we have showed, they have proved to be some of the most sensitive areas a researcher can touch upon. Handling them with care and consideration towards all sides involved in the process is essential and should not be underestimated in favour of the research scopes. Treating consent, confidentiality and intimacy with proper respect, and being transparent in negotiations with respondents helps build trust and consolidate connection in relation with them, be they children or adults. Last, but not least, we have illustrated how communication with children (as with adults) means finding a common language, common perspectives on subjects of interest, and most of all trying to find the solution from within, diversify the instruments used, in order to reveal that ultimately, children are competent and the most relevant informants regarding their own experience.

The ethnographic vignettes we discussed throughout this paper represent a collection of experiences and subjective manners to approach research challenges with children. We described the particularities of engaging in such research in the Romanian context and discussed the solutions we came up with in this process. We underline the importance of adjusting research methods and instruments in order to fit the child's needs and interests, and to allow for the child to play an active role in the development of the research process. Furthermore, while we do find correspondence with other authors, we do not aim at generalising or defining our experiences as established

method. They worked in specific contexts and, in fact, this is one of our main claims: when doing research with children, one should follow the subject and mould their approach accordingly. We draw attention to the lack of discussion about these issues in Romanian academia, and to the stringent need for more and different experiences explicitly addressed in the literature, so that good practices can be promoted. We have also pointed out the existing gap in the Romanian legal system concerning the protection of the child and that of the researcher throughout the process of research.

Whatever the solutions, the common ground we argue for is that children are persons, granted with legal rights enforced or deferred, and they should be treated as such, not only in research projects, but also in all areas that involves them.

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