
11-1-2010

(Inter)Active Interviewing in Childhood Research: On Children's Identity Work in Interviews

Stina Fernqvist

Uppsala University, stina.fernqvist@soc.uu.se

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Fernqvist, S. (2010). (Inter)Active Interviewing in Childhood Research: On Children's Identity Work in Interviews. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1309-1327. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1350>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

The advertisement features a dark blue background on the left with the text "Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate" in white, followed by the tagline "Indulge in Culture" in a smaller font. Below this, it says "Exclusively Online • 18 Credits" and a "LEARN MORE" button. The NSU logo is also present. On the right, a photograph shows a group of six diverse individuals sitting on a stone ledge with "NOVA SOUTHEASTERN" inscribed on it.

Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

(Inter)Active Interviewing in Childhood Research: On Children's Identity Work in Interviews

Abstract

Seeing identity as work produced in interaction is a starting point in this current study, where we are analyzing interviews with children living in economic hardship, and how everyday life in economic hardship in one way or another becomes significant for their identity work, is the main empirical material. This article is intended to illustrate how to (a) combine James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium's (1995) active interview approach with elements from Erving Goffman's (1974/1986) frame analysis, and (b) introduce this approach as a fruitful way of analyzing children's narratives. Also, by regarding the interview as interaction and thereby acknowledging the respondents' participation in the research process, I argue that an interactive interview approach has both ethical and analytical advantages that should appeal to qualitative childhood studies.

Keywords

Interviewing, Childhood Sociology, Interaction, Power, Frames

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

(Inter)Active Interviewing in Childhood Research: On Children's Identity Work in Interviews

Stina Fernqvist

Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Seeing identity as work produced in interaction is a starting point in this current study, where analyzing interviews with children living in economic hardship, and how everyday life in economic hardship in one way or another becomes significant for their identity work, is the main empirical material. This article is intended to illustrate how to (a) combine James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium's (1995) active interview approach with elements from Erving Goffman's (1974/1986) frame analysis, and (b) introduce this approach as a fruitful way of analyzing children's narratives. Also, by regarding the interview as interaction and thereby acknowledging the respondents' participation in the research process, I argue that an interactive interview approach has both ethical and analytical advantages that should appeal to qualitative childhood studies. Key Words: Interviewing, Childhood Sociology, Interaction, Power, and Frames

Introduction

When the perspective that came to be known as sociology of childhood was articulated in the mid 1980's, the focus was to understand children as a social category, which is characterized by marginalization and lack of agency (see Lee, 1998; Qvortrup, 1994). In addition to childhood studies on macro level, research about children should comprise children's involvement and participation; interacting with children, one may argue, is a prerequisite for understanding children's experiences in general and understanding children whose experiences in one way or another lie outside the frame of "normal childhoods" in particular (cf., Cocks, 2006, Fernqvist, Näsman, & von Gerber, 2008). In this paper, I will argue that research interviews with children, and the interaction that takes place in these settings, are valuable resources when it comes to analyzing children's and adolescents' identity work (cf., Alasutari, 1995). The interview situation is a setting in which specific ways of conduct are expected, which makes Erving Goffman's *frame* concept relevant for the analysis (Goffman, 1974).

I will illustrate this discussion by presenting examples of framing and interactive strategies from a current interview study dealing with children's experiences of economic hardship, and if, and how, this marginalized position has implications for their identity work.

During this initial stage of analyzing the interview material, I have become increasingly interested in how interactive strategies during the interview can be interpreted, and how an interactive interview approach can be of help to make these strategies visible and make them a part of the analysis. During later stages in this ongoing study, I will integrate the findings presented here with elements in the narratives that point more specifically to identity work in concrete situations in relation to economic hardship, and how the children themselves regard different situations and practices as significant.

To regard the interview as interaction implies that the role of the informant becomes redefined, since s/he is seen as a participant in the process of interpretation and reflexivity rather than as a provider of answers to the researcher. Interviewing is thus perceived as a dynamic process in which “all knowing subjects are actively and intentionally engaged in knowledge production” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008, p. 430). The reflexive approach called *active interviewing* (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 2000, 2003) has several features which I find useful when trying to extend the process of meaning-making in qualitative interviewing with children and adolescents. I will also explicate some of the main features of this concept as it has been articulated by James Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium in several publications (see for example Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 2003), and also relate this strategy to other interactionist approaches represented mainly by Erving Goffman (1959/1990, 1974/1986) and Pertti Alasuutari (1995). My focus is on discussing how (inter)active interviewing can be used in childhood research as means of increasing children’s participation in research, and contesting the concept of empowerment in relation to this. By participation I mainly refer to an active involvement in the interview situation, and not participation in the process of analyzing the material.

Thus, I see active interviewing as a way of applying some principal features of childhood sociology methodologically by increasing the interviewee’s level of participation and conceivable scope for agency, as well as increasing the researcher’s acknowledgement of such agency. I argue that an active interview approach can acknowledge children’s use of frames in their interaction. I will also briefly discuss how active interviewing and framing – two concepts I find closely related to each other – can be associated with an issue that has been the object for extensive discussions within the field of childhood sociology, namely children’s competence (Cocks, 2006; Lee, 1998). Children have traditionally been viewed as *becomings* rather than *beings* (Qvortrup, 1994), and children’s’ traditional ontological status as *becomings* connotes immaturity and impairment in different areas, not the least verbally. Reconsidering “competence” has therefore been of major importance in childhood sociology, and it has shifted from being thought of as an essential concept (you either are or are not competent) to being more dependent on context and situation; both children and adults can, according to Lee “be moved in and out of competence (...) and in and out of the social exclusion that these characteristics afford” (p. 474). In Goffman’s frame concept (1974/1986), I see a potential for re-evaluating the concept of children’s competence. I argue that an active interview approach can acknowledge children’s use of frames in their interaction.

The Interview Study

The exploratory methodological approach chosen for the project as a whole is combining thematic interviews, questionnaires, children's drawings and analysis of documents. The primarily qualitative approach was chosen partly due to the lack of research on the topic child perspectives on poverty. The focus of the study - children's own perspectives - demands an exploratory interpretative analysis to grasp children's own understandings, terminology and conceptualizations. To offer various forms of communication - words and pictures - increases children’s scope for action which is an ethical demand crucial from the perspective of sociology of childhood. For this reason, as well as analytical purposes, I have concluded every interview session by asking the child to draw pictures resembling symbols of economic affluence and scarcity from a child’s perspective. In the following however, I will

focus exclusively on transcribed material from the interviews; the drawings will be analyzed in forthcoming publications.

Participants. The study from which the empirical examples in the following are collected consists of interviews with children and adolescents between the ages of seven and 16. As of October 2008, I am still in the process of conducting interviews. The number of interviews is therefore yet undetermined, but my ambition is that the study should comprise of interviews with ten to 15 participating children and adolescents. In order to get in contact with respondents, I have used county court records from two Swedish districts where the parents in the family have appealed a decision by the local social welfare agency concerning financial aid between 2004 and 2007. I have first contacted the selected families by telephone, and after this initial contact I have sent a letter and a brochure containing brief information about the project (with the parent's consent).

I have chosen this approach for two reasons; firstly, I preferred to go via public material (court records are generally made public in Sweden) and thereby not violating secrecy by going through classified registers of welfare recipients, etc. Secondly, I chose not to go via gate-keepers such as social welfare workers, deacons and so forth. Besides the possible ethical dilemmas where families may feel forced to participate in a study that has been presented to them by someone they are in some way dependant on, I see a methodological risk since I lose control over how the informants are informed about the project, informant selection and reasons why decisions not to participate came about. When I contact the families directly over the telephone, these risks are diminished.

Carrying out the interviews. The interviews have then taken place in the homes of the families, and have been carried out individually with each child. An interview with a parent has been conducted at the same occasion. At these occasions, another project member has interviewed the parents. The purpose of interviewing parents is to see how the children's narratives may be mirrored in the parents' narratives, and to see how the parents articulate strategies to cope with economic hardship in everyday life. Also, talking to the parents gives an insight into the economic state of the family which of course is of interest even if the child's subjective recall of living in economic hardship is the main issue. In order to enable the respondents to develop their narratives, and for myself to focus on interesting utterances that were left undeveloped at the time of the interview, follow-up interviews are being conducted. This procedure is of both ethical and analytical value since it enables both the informant to reflect upon the previous interview and to share these thoughts with me, but is also an opportunity for me to focus on the discussions that seems most relevant.

Analyzing the material. The interview guide consists of questions regarding different aspects of everyday life in economic hardship from a children's perspective. The questions are categorized under different themes such as how the school environment is experienced, how they perceive the interaction with their parents and the financial situation in the family, to name a few. Questions based on these themes thus make up the main structure of the interview guide. The themes rather than the questions guide me through the interview, which facilitates the interactive process and makes it easier to lend space for narratives that at first sight may seem to be of low significance. The interviews are recorded, but I also take notes about different aspects

of the interview that may be of relevance when interpreting the interaction. If siblings have entered the room and what effect this may have had, how body language has been used in correspondence to different utterances and how the children in general receive my questions and comments may be of interest when analyzing the interview process in addition to their answers (cf., Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

The interviews are then transcribed, and I have carried out the analysis by first seeing how the themes from the interview guide are interpreted and negotiated by the informants. Next, I have tried to identify how the children and adolescents position themselves in relation to the interview situation and to the issues we are discussing. Finally, I have contextualized these strategies (which I see as a relevant step in order to conceptualize identity work) and problematized how they can be viewed in relation to both the informants' age position but also the economic status of the family.

Trustworthiness and ethics. When using qualitative interviews as a primary data resource, one can always question the reliability in the material, and if the informants' narratives can be regarded as accurate (cf. Kvale, 1997; Seidman, 1998). The interviewers' role may well be questioned, as his/her questions can be formulated in a way that influence the informants' responses, and the entire interview run the risk of being an object for strictly subjective and capricious interpretation (Kvale). By regarding the interview as active however, one reconceptualize the role of the informant as something else than a rather passive individual whose ability to leave full and "accurate" answers is dependant on the interviewer. Interviewing thus has to be an interpretative process, and rather than problematizing however the informants' answers are true and accurate one has to validate the interviews by looking at how the answers and the interaction is interpreted and whether these interpretations are reasonable and reliable (Kvale; Trost, 2005).

The project follows the ethical guidelines for social sciences in Sweden, which was stated and hence evaluated in the procedure of assessing the application for funding by the Swedish Council for working Life and Social research (FAS), which is a part of the Swedish state. Informed consent has been obtained from both parent and child before the interviews. The informants are informed in both the letter and right before the interview about the steps we take to ensure confidentiality, i.e., not stating their names, schools, hometowns etc., in the published material. The published quotations from the transcribed material have also been slightly processed; both in order to make them more readable but also to protect the informants' anonymity (aside from using pseudonyms) by not reproduce exact choice of words, word order etc., that could make it possible to identify them (Trost, 2005).

The Interview as Setting for Negotiating Identity

My interest in the processes of identity work, where I see the experiences from living in economic hardship as in one way or another significant, is grounded in interactionist perspectives and an emphasis on the "doing" in social processes (cf., Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1959/1990, 1974/1986). What we perceive as social reality is according to an interactionist perspective made meaningful through processes of interaction that are both enabled and restricted by cultural resources (Goffman, 1974/1986; Marvasti, 2008). In accordance with post-modern claims in social science (cf., Alasuutari, 2004; Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997), individual identity can only be understood as non-static, i.e., as a dynamic process where identity construction is a reciprocal and self-reflecting activity (Collins).

Seeing identity as work produced in different situations, and interpreting both the informant's reflections on these situations as well as the way identity negotiations are being conducted in the interview situation, thereby becomes a central part of this study. I consider the interviews to be something besides a reconstruction of prior events; namely, as possible arenas for doing identity work, or to use Goffman's terminology, presentations of self (cf., Goffman, 1959/1990, 1974/1986). The act of interviewing becomes meaningful when constructed as a situated and, to a varying degree, regulated practice. Knowledge produced during interviews can therefore not be separated from the performances taking place in the interview setting; it is not only a matter of what the interview consists of in terms of statements and narratives, but also how these are produced in interaction (Alasuutari, 1995; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Koro-Ljungberg, 2008).

“What is it that is going on here?” – Understanding Framing as Identity Work

Conceptualizing the interview as a setting for negotiating identity can be understood in line with Erving Goffman's *frame* concept (Goffman, 1974/1986). To frame a situation, i.e., to conduct ourselves in a given situation with respect to the internalized structure and formalized practice of social interaction is according to Goffman a more or less intuitive strategy used as a way of understanding everyday life, and to lend meaning to the situations we find ourselves in (Ibid.). According to Goffman, individuals enter every situation searching for an answer to the question “what is it that is going on here?” (Ibid., p. 8), and frame situations in everyday life as a response to that question. Thus, framing is both a matter of interpretation and doing, and also of having a tacit knowledge about the very existence of frames within human interaction.

I regard the interview as a framed situation where the individuals involved are aware of these more or less formalized practices of interviewing, and adjust their performances to it. Frame analysis may then be an analytic tool used to understand how interviewees become active contributors in interpreting their experiences, and thereby partake in the process as co-creators of knowledge (cf., Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). Even if Goffman's concept can be viewed as structurally connoted (since he is not always consistent on the ontological status of the concept), I find it useful in this particular study through the stress of individual agency in establishing, maintaining and breaking frames (Alasuutari, 1995; Goffman, 1974/1986). Even if the scope for action in every situation is restricted and “built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events” (Goffman, 1974/1986, p. 8), discussing how individuals negotiate these frames and make them meaningful in relation to their identity work deepens the understanding of these processes.

To frame a situation is to make an interpretation of it, understand it, adjust to it or maybe contest it and eventually cope with it: “When in everyday life we form some picture of ‘what is going on’, we have located a frame that makes the situation (at least partially) understandable”(Alasuutari, 1995, p. 111). When defining frame as a concept that shapes our performances in a given situation (Alasuutari, 1995; Goffman, 1974/1986), one understands the interview practice as something besides information retrieval. To analyze the children's narratives relating to a retrospective, biographic perspective is nonetheless important to me; to stress the importance of an interactive approach and the events taking place during the interview does not entail a decreased interest in what is actually being said. However, I wish to put forth the significance of

situating oneself in relation to these narratives and to the interview process - to the frame.

The interview frame can be divided into different frames with different restrictions and possibilities; in the following, I will for instance focus on the interactive interview, which in many respects differs from a traditional research interview frame. Since the respondents in this study are children living in economic hardship, yet another frame may have to be articulated in order to grasp “what it is that is going on”. Previous studies have shown that children living in economic hardship experience feelings of deviance and exclusion (Daly & Leonard, 2002; Näsman & von Gerber, 1996; Ridge, 2002), and this may during research interviews with children surface as significant in relation to their identity work.

Framing and the Concept of Competence

So how, then, can the frame concept contribute to childhood sociology and to interview studies involving children? Framing carries elements of socialization since the interactants’ level of cultural competence regulates how well a specific frame can be established (Goffman, 1974/1986), and this aspect becomes particularly relevant when discussing children’s scope for agency in relation to frame analysis. Goffman does not comment directly on whether children or young people can possess these competences; however, children become visible in Goffman’s work through exemplifications of frame inconsistencies with quotes from children. In Goffman’s defense, he does put forth these examples among others such as tourists trying to get around in an unfamiliar context and misunderstandings in everyday conversations in general (see Goffman, 1974/1986, pp. 496-498) He also describes how individuals develop different strategies, sensibilities and competences in order to organize their experiences (Ibid.), and his emphasis on development in this context may suggest that children are not competent enough to partake in framing (since children traditionally have been perceived as undeveloped).

The issue of children’s’ development and competence are central in the critique of social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, from childhood sociology were it is argued that a traditional view of children as undeveloped, passive and incompetent until accounted for as adults strongly influences how children as a social category is regarded (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Lee, 1998). Returning to Goffman, I find that his stress on the cultural competence as contextually grounded does not exclude children from being culturally competent in this sense. Rather, being able to interpret and establish, modulate or shift frames, and thereby extending one’s cultural competence, can be regarded as a socializing practice without associating the socialization per se to imaginations of children as being “defective form[s] of adult[s], social only in their future potential but not in their present being” (James et al., 1998, p. 6). Being competent enough to frame situations can, of course, also entail enough competence to manipulate individuals one is interacting with, or to “over-adjust” to a frame; perceiving a respondent as “competent” – child or adult – is thus no guarantee for an unproblematic interaction.

Of course, children can as well as adults misinterpret a frame, or conduct themselves inappropriately in relation to the frame, but not simply because they are children. Being positioned as a child should therefore not disqualify an individual as being considered competent enough to interpret situations as framed. Everyday life of children, as for adults, holds an entire repertoire of different frames and even very young children are often well aware of the varying scopes for actions that go with

different frames. Sitting at the kitchen table for a meal constitutes one frame, and sitting at the same table playing with modeling clay is another; mealtime at preschool can be situated differently from having a meal at home, etc., and children who have not yet learnt to speak are still often able to make distinctions like these. As I interpret Goffman's notions on developing cultural competence, children's presumed status as *becomings* does not contradict the ability to become competent in framing through interpretation of situations and acting in accord with these interpretations.

Establishing and Shifting Frames in Interviews

Framing can thus be thought of as a token of cultural competence, i.e., an ability to interpret different situations and position oneself in relation to these interpretations. In the following, I will illustrate this conceptualization by discussing some empirical examples from my ongoing study. These examples are intended to show both (a) how framing and other strategies used by children and adolescents in interviews can be made visible by using an active approach, and (b) how everyday life as a child in a family living in economic hardship becomes significant in relation to these strategies. When analyzing the interview material, it becomes clear that the children tend to frame themselves in something that I interpret as a frame of responsibility. This is done by either positioning themselves and the siblings (or children in general) as costly or by expressing an insight in the family's purchases that one might not expect from young children. Frequently during the interviews, I see distinct shifts between children stressing themselves as being responsible and mature on one hand, and on the other manifesting a less restricted and more carefree attitude. It can be suggested that the latter frame is a manifest of a childish frame, and could thus be interpreted as a strategy of *doing age*, or in this context a reinforcement of stereotypical childlike actions (Närvänen & Näsman, 2007). I will return to expressions of this strategy later in this article.

S: How is the money situation in your family?

Rebecca (nine years old): It's OK...but I'm kind of worried about mom.

S: Mhm, how come?

R: She doesn't have any...every time I go shopping for milk, I notice that she has like just a twenty-crown-bill and five one-crown-coins...

S: Mhm...in her wallet?

R: Yeah...so I'm kind of worried.

S: Mm...

R: But otherwise...I think we're going to be alright.

The responsibility frame can be featured through the child's narratives regarding chores around the house, or as concern for their parents as in the example above. The material dimension of money – bills and coins – are expressed as significant symbols for economic well-being and safety in several interviews, and very explicitly in the interview with Rebecca. She is concerned about her mother having small amounts of money in her wallet; her father, who she spends the odd weekend with, has several bills in his wallet and his economic state (which is described as unstable in other passages) is therefore of no concern.

Altering between expressing responsibility and doing childhood may occur within the same passage in the interview, and can be interpreted as a shift of frame.

When 12-year-old Jessica talks about family arguments concerning lack of money, she frames herself as a child without responsibilities:

S: Does it ever happen that your mom picks a fight with you about money? Maybe she thinks that you spend too much or something like that...?

J: No, I guess that was...She doesn't get like really really mad or anything, but she gets a little bit annoyed because I go around and hassle her constantly about giving me some money for candy...(laugh) because I spent all my monthly pocket money...

S: Oh, I see...

J: And I was dying for some candy...(laugh)

Jessica expresses notions about what her responsibility should be in a situation like that; making sure that her pocket money is evenly distributed throughout the month so that she would not be forced to "hassle" her mother. Nevertheless, she sums up the episode with the remark that she was "dying for some candy", which can be interpreted as a shift to a more careless – or childlike - frame. The little laughter in the end is, as I interpreted it at the time of the interview and when I listened to the taping of it, a signal of familiarity and mutual understanding about the situation – a carefree child is expected to do such a thing and get away with it.

A couple of minutes later in the interview however, she expresses almost parental concerns about daily routines that most children her age do not reflect upon: herself, her sisters and their friends as expense items in everyday life.

S: (...) is there something that you miss out on or can't do because of the scarcity of money in the household?

J: Well...friends don't come around for a snack or stay for dinner or anything like that...because it's too expensive.

S: Around the house?

J: Yeah, it gets expensive if you're going to invite them to stay for dinner often and so on...

S: Yes, exactly.

J: Since there are four of us already (...) sometimes you want to (let my friends stay), but sometimes it just can't be done. It doesn't really matter that much to me, but it would be fun.

S: Okay, but did your mom tell you that you can't let them stay, or do you think that it's a bad idea for them to stay...?

J: Hmm, well...it's more like...Before, when my friends had their afternoon snack at our place quite often; mom said that...that it becomes too expensive when there are like three of them having a snack here...and then there are my sisters, too.

I interpret Jessica's description of not being able to let friends stay over for meals as a shift to a more mature and concerned mode; or to a frame of responsibility. Looking closer at this quote, it constructs this to be her definition of the situation rather than her mother's requests that originates these concerns; even when asked directly, she more or less maintains this position. This responsibility frame is therefore called upon by her own interpretation rather than direct pressure from a parent, which is relevant when it comes to acknowledging and discussing children's

awareness of scarce financial resources in the family, and their willingness to cut back on expenses they generate for the sake of the family (see also Näsman & von Gerber, 1996; Ridge, 2002).

(Inter)Active Interviewing as Methodological Strategy

Setting out an active interview approach might seem like a tautology when discussing qualitative methodology; can interviewing be anything but active? In the field of qualitative social research, interviewing is to a varying extent perceived as an interpretive and reflexive process. Why, then, label a certain interview strategy as active?

A distinctly interactionist approach such as active interviewing regards the interview as an active process, where both interviewer and interviewee are involved in creating knowledge and meaning in dialogical processes (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). This approach is however not defined as *interactive* interviewing, even though Holstein and Gubrium throughout their publications on the subject stress the importance of interaction. Labeling the approach as active suggests that the activity is something else than interaction; maybe suggesting that the interview subject is encouraged to be active. I will return to this aspect later, but now emphasize that my purpose is not to activate the subject but rather to analyze the interaction between us in the interview – and thereby also problematize my role in the interview; as a consequence, I will alternate between the concepts “active” and “interactive” in this text, where the term “active” primarily is used in relation to Holstein and Gubrium, and “interactive” in relation to my own work.

Active interviewing as defined by Holstein and Gubrium marks a distance from a conceptualization of the interview situation as a model of stimulus and response, where the interview subject is objectified and constructed as passive. Instead of positioning the interview subject as a “vessel of answers” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 7) whose only purpose is to provide informative answers to the interviewer when approached with questions, the active interview approach emphasizes the interaction as significant. Aside from the narratives’ content, the interaction taking place between the interviewer and the interviewee is afflicted with analytic potential in itself. The widened scope for agency that the active strategy (ideally) grants the respondent is perceived to make narratives richer, and acknowledges the respondent’s identity work in interaction during the interview situation as well as through the reconstructive narratives of significant events (see also Alasuutari, 1995; Widdicombe, 1998). During the interviews, I have taken into consideration aspects of the interview that might be of importance when understanding children’s identity work in relation to living in economic hardship – narrative content as well as rhetoric and interactive shifts.

Power Relations in Interactive Interviewing

Interactive interviewing offers many challenges for the researcher in terms of openness and sensitivity. Nevertheless, the approach is often described as relatively unproblematic, as if both participants in the interaction are in agreement about the frame of the situation, and that meaning-making interaction is enabled through collaboration between the interviewer and the interviewee (cf., Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Of course, interviewing is never unproblematic in this respect. When

conducting interview research, one should always consider ethical implications due to power relations, which are of course as inherent in the research process as in everyday life.

In interviews, power asymmetries between the respondent and the researcher can make the respondent feel obliged to share information with the researcher that he/she would not otherwise do. The respondent may feel subordinated and therefore not entitled to interrupt the interviewer, or in other ways try to gain control over the situation (cf., Trost 2005). Aside from the researcher's position as interviewer which entails an inherent control of the situation, power asymmetries based on gender, age, class etc., can also play a major part when dealing with ethical issues in interviewing. Naturally, when interviewing children I have to acknowledge my position as an adult researcher, and how this position is interpreted by them; am I perceived as someone they can confide in, or someone to respect, or both? What are my responsibilities?

The adult-child relation is associated with a great amount of more or less naturalized conceptions of competence, respect and power. Furthermore, power asymmetries between adults and children could be defined as governed by principles of care as well as of participation, where children are on one hand seen as competent and autonomous, but on the other hand in need of adults' care (cf., Närvänen & Näsman, 2007; Neale, 2002). A way for me to balance these principles is to show that I am willing to allow the child's to participate as well as to take responsibility as an adult by not acting in a brusque or disrespectful manner. This is of ethical as well as analytical importance, since deviations that might be dismissed as irrelevant and "childish" can be of importance for the analysis. An example of this comes from an interview with seven-year-old Lisa:

S: What does it feel like for you when there is not a lot of money at home?

L: Hmm...

S: Does it make you feel sad?

L: No...I don't really care about money that much.

S: No...?

L: Only sometimes, on Saturdays...

S: Oh yeah, the candy...

L: Yes (laughs)

S: So, what do you think will happen to a family if they can't pay rent...

L: Hey look...I made that mirror.

S: Did you make that, really?

L: That one, on the bookshelf.

S: Oh, that one! Pretty.

L: I painted. And I made that clock too. That little blue one.

S: Oh yeah, right! Very pretty.

During the interview, I interpreted Lisa's desire to show me her handicraft as signs of distraction and boredom on her part and did not think much more of it. Later on however, Lisa's mother showed me portraits she herself had painted of other family members. Furthermore, the interview with the mother revealed that artistic skill was a significant part of their identity as a family several generations back. With these additional interactions, Lisa's eagerness to show these items to me can be read differently than simply as a young child's strategy to avoid a boring topic. Instead,

one may interpret it as an expression for a family identity and her part in that family mediated through the ability to be creative. If I had put more stress on sticking to the prepared questions, and thereby decreased Lisa's participation as well as neglected the care principle, this dimension would perhaps have gone unnoticed.

Viewing power relations from an interactive approach does however provide new perspectives on the power play in interviews and how it can be problematized. The asymmetric relationship between the actors in the interview situation should not only be regarded as a disadvantage in terms of ethics and possible distortion; rather, it can be viewed as a dimension of interviewing which has an impact on the interview practice and, hence, is of importance for the analysis:

(...) all aspects of a documented conversation have important use value in that they serve as clues for the analysis. The way in which power relations are reflected in the research relationship, for example, will not be seen as an ethical problem but on the contrary as a factor that makes possible the analysis of those power relations in the first place. (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 90)

The supposedly fixed power asymmetry in interviews can be perceived as even more distinct when it comes to interviewing marginalized groups in general, such as adults interviewing children (cf., Punch, 2002; Seidman, 1998). However, power orders based on age, gender and class may have effects on power and control in interaction between adult and child/adolescent in both directions. My position as a thirty something female scholar situates me differently in an interview with a nine-year-old-girl who attends elementary school compared to an interview with a seventeen-year-old boy who has dropped out of high school (and is also physically bigger than me); even if the power relations in the interview frame as such are established early on, they are likely to be challenged and re-negotiated during interviews (cf., Egeberg Holmgren, 2008). Thus, one can not assume that the interview is an, under all circumstances, top-down power relation where the researcher always holds the superior position.

Incorporating Interactive Interviewing in Childhood Research

Using the interactive approach when interviewing children can help to acknowledge children's scope for agency since their narratives, reflections about them and their performances in interaction are the backbone of the analysis. From my perspective, interactive interviewing and the methodological and practical measures that this approach entails, has connections to the wing of childhood sociology that emphasizes children's marginalized position in society and limited scope for participation (Näsman, 1995; Neale, 2002; Prout, 2005). By being interpreted as an active subject and contributor of knowledge, the respondent – child - is less of a "vessel of answer" and more of an interacting subject. Even so, using an active approach when interviewing children poses several challenges for me as an interviewer.

When involving children and adolescents in an interactive interview, the frame may have to be established differently. Being the subject of an interview can perhaps evoke senses of pride and empowerment, maybe even more so when the respondent in question is a minor and not usually offered the role as a source of information (as a traditional perspective on interviews would suggest the respondents' role in an

interview to be). The attention that accompanies this specific interview frame can also call forth feelings of inferiority, maybe during the same interview. In order to strengthen the positive feelings towards the interview, and to diminish any misgivings, I emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions, and that it is OK to ask if anything is unclear.

The interactive interview frame is partly established by the previously mentioned written information that is being sent to the participating families beforehand. This consists of a letter addressed to both parents and child, and a small brochure with comprehensible information and images relating to the project. Hopefully, addressing the children this way, and not only their parents, will increase the understanding of both the project and the interview and acknowledge the child as a participant in the process. I have started the interview session by presenting myself and my research interest, and I have also tried to maintain the frame by asking follow-up questions, suggesting interpretations of different events, etc. Establishing this frame offers a great deal of interpretative work on both parts; it is not certain that a young child knows what is expected from the interview and what our roles are within that frame, and how it differs from being questioned by, say, a teacher or a parent.

Even though I am not primarily interested in objective recollections of specific episodes, I am interested in what is important for the interviewee, and how s/he attributes meaning to it. The narratives do not necessarily have to correspond to authentic events in every detail, but they have to have some significance and convey something about the interviewee's identity work. It could be argued that the "active informant" in the "Holstein/Gubriumesque" sense could not, or should not, be a child for this reason; a traditionalist view on children's competence would perhaps stress that the young child needs more structure in order to make fruitful contributions to the active interview. However, I cannot guarantee that narratives expressed by an adult respondent in an interactive interview are accurate, so why question children's role in interactive interviewing based on them being positioned as "children"?

This is, again, a matter of defining children's competence and recognizing their ability to interact within the interview frame and thereby produce narratives. Following my interpretation of Goffman (1974/1986), children cannot on the basis of age be excluded from the cultural competence that enables framing and thus there should be no reason to disregard their narratives and framing strategies on the basis of age alone.

Aside from widening the analysis, and viewing the interaction itself as meaningful, I suggest that the interactive approach is relevant – however, not unproblematic - when interviewing children and adolescents. If young children are not considered competent enough to create narratives about their experiences, their role as co-constructors of knowledge becomes less self-evident. It is therefore up to me as a researcher to interpret their narratives and the interaction taking place as meaningful, even if this proves to be a difficult task. It is not a matter of questioning children's competence in being active makers of meaning; rather, it has mainly to do with my ability as a researcher to re-conceptualize the interview situation. However, I find it important to point out the benefits as well as the challenges that are involved in choosing children and adolescents as active respondents.

Breaking and Maintaining Frame by Doing Age

When interviewing children and adolescents, different strategies can be used from the respondent's position to widen their scope for action. The young child can for instance do this by acting in a mischievous or unfocused way, while the adolescent may use that position to make fun of my questions, try to shock me with vulgar statements or refuse to have the interview recorded on tape. These strategies can be viewed as a way of *doing age*, i.e., power resources related to age as internalized in children and adolescents, and how these are used through age positions in different contexts (Närvänen & Näsman, 2007). These actions may function as strategies used in order to gain some insight in, and control over, the interview situation from the interviewee's perspective – in other words, to frame the situation. Instead of regarding actions like these as failures on my part – since the very presence of them might indicate that I as an interviewer have lost control over the situation - I view them as part of the interaction, and hence, it becomes interesting to see *when* these actions occur and *how* they are exercised.

In interviews with both children and adolescents, I have for instance found that “I don't know”- statements often are likely to connote something else than not knowing; instead, these speech acts can also be viewed as strategies used to manifest one's position as a child or adolescent in the interview frame. Breaking frame is to change the events in the frame into another direction, and to somehow alter the turn of events; “When an individual participates in a definition of the situation, circumstances can cause him suddenly to let go of the grasp the frame has upon him, even though the activity itself may continue” (Goffman, 1974/1986, p. 349). As I interpret Goffman, breaking frame is a result of individual agency in a given situation which, even if Goffman put it more as an act without direct intention, can be used as actively a way of reclaiming power and influence. This is also how I interpret these strategies in my material, since they often are a response to themes and questions that may be sensitive, uncomfortable or tricky for the interviewee to engage in. To state that you do not know the answer to a question may, in this context, be the result of such a strategy; for the child, emphasizing that you don't know can be a way of “doing child”, i.e., being unaware and without knowledge of important matters. For the adolescent on the other hand, the same phrase can be a way of “doing teenager” by acting jaded and uninterested.

The main point here is that these statements should be regarded as something besides a reflection of the respondent's knowledge, such as social speech acts with meaning (cf., Woofitt & Widdicombe, 2006).

S: Why do you think money is important, besides buying stuff and doing different things, can there be something else...?

Anne (age nine): Buying food...

S: Mhm

A: Buy things you need...then I don't know.

(...)

S: How do you think kids your age get money?

A: Eh...I have no idea.

S: No one has any weekly allowance or anything?

A: My friend Sarah gets that. Then I don't know.

(...)

S: Some families have less money than others, why do you think that is?

A: Maybe they work less, or because they kind of...some are married and stuff, they have more money because they can save together...and...it depends of what kind of job you have...then I don't know anything more.

Anne uses the “I don't know”-like statements as a final remark on many of her answers during the entire interview; the passages above was uttered during approximately one minute. Interestingly, in the last quote she mentions several reasons why certain families have scarce financial resources – more than children in other interviews have mentioned. Yet, she finishes her statement by stressing that she does not know more on the subject.

During the interview with 13-year-old Tom, the “I don't know” (or more specifically “dunno”) - comments, and very choppy answers in general, are not conceived so much as a manifestation of a child-position without knowledge; rather, his remarks indicates a positioning as teenager who does not really bother that much about maintaining the interview frame (or cooperate with me to maintain it) but is on the other hand reinforcing the “teenager”-position:

S: What do you think happens to a family who can't pay their bills and buy things they need?

T: Eh...dunno...

S: Maybe they'll have to move out...?

T: Yeah...

S: Can these families get help from somewhere? Is there someone who can help them?

T: I'm sure there is...don't know what they're called...

This section becomes interesting in comparison with the statements his mother made during her interview, assuming that these were correct; she and her family had been in contact numerous times with the local social welfare agency, and her two eldest sons (including Tom) had been highly involved in these contacts. For some reason, Tom did not want to involve me in this – instead, he did not acknowledge any contact or knowledge about instances like the social welfare agency. Of course, I may have come across as unclear in my questions concerning the matter which would explain his unawareness about it; another possibility is that he was concerned about his family's integrity regarding this issue. However, not knowing or not engaging in interaction was a recurrent theme during the interview with Tom. His expressions of not knowing (or not bothering) lead me to interpret these statements as doing age, and as a way of gaining influence and control over the situation (cf., Närvänen & Näsman, 2007).

S: How do you think grown-ups think about other grown-ups who have little money? Do they feel sorry for them [too]?

T: Yeah...

S: You think so?

T: Yeah...

S: Not that they have themselves to blame somehow...?

T: Nope

(...)

S: Is there something you would like someone to do for kids in families with little money?

T: No...dunno.

S: Is there something you would like someone to do for your family?

T: Nope

Of course, these actions are not exclusively tied to either the position of the child or the adolescent. However, I regard them as significant in the interview process, since examples of such position-specific practices have become visible when carrying out the interviews and are examples of how interviewees position themselves by doing what is expected from them on the basis of positions in the age order (cf., Hockey & James, 2003). By regarding the interview power play as a resource for the analysis rather than as an obstacle or a drawback, it becomes possible to widen the analysis of the situation and to re-interpret and problematize the interaction (cf., Alasuutari, 1995; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

Being Empowered - Being Active?

In several fields, not the least in social work where children living under difficult circumstances are of major research interest, empowerment has for some time now been a powerful and desirable concept which encourages self-help, enabling oppressed groups to take control over their lives and transfer power from the subjects' surrounding contexts to the subjects themselves (Adams, 2003; Payne, 1997). Following this reasoning, to empower interview subjects and acknowledge that they own their narratives (and thus should have more control over the research process) can thus be considered as a way of challenging traditional interview techniques and seeing how assumed asymmetric power relations in the interview situation can be reconsidered. A "radical transformation of the traditional approach of interviewing" (Mishler, 1986, p. 117) that acknowledges the researcher's responsibility to pave the way for – and legitimize – the interviewees' own narratives. So, then, can one really talk about incorporating active interviewing in childhood research; is not the active approach there already with empowerment of children through participation in research processes?

The distinction between activating and empowering can be considered rather slim, but is nonetheless significant. If respondents are fully considered to be active subjects, there would be no need for their interview counterpart – the researcher – to empower them. According to Holstein and Gubrium, the notion of empowered respondents is actually not that far from construing the respondents as "vessels of answers", since the interviewee-position all the same is afflicted with passivity and subordination (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). To put it in differently, the respondent cannot make power claims in the research interview, but can only be empowered by the researcher. The idea of the researcher enabling respondents to share their narratives does not denote the respondent as an active subject; rather, "the respondent (...) is viewed as virtually possessing what we seek to know about" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 36). Thus, it is not only a matter of empowering the respondent, but more importantly acknowledging the interview as interaction where all participants are active producers of knowledge (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 2003). Therein lies, according to Holstein and Gubrium, the significant – but perhaps

not so extensively problematized - distinction between empowerment and activating (cf., Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

The question remains, however, if the mechanism behind activating is that different from that of empowering; both concepts presuppose the interviewer as the originator behind the interaction. Is the distinction between empowering and activating really that profound on an ontological level? One could very well argue that it is not since both concepts suggest that the respondent is passive and adaptable, while the interviewer alone holds the position that can, and do, influence the interviewee. The distinction between these two concepts is far from self-evident, and I relate this problem to Holstein and Gubrium's (2003) reluctance to define their approach as *interactive* interviewing. When labeling the approach interactive, the question about who enables what in the interview becomes redundant since you cannot "interactivate" someone or something. Of course, I as an interviewer have more control over the situation, and it would be naïve to believe that my actions do not have an effect on the interviewee what so ever- but that is another matter than making respondents active. One may thus object that the problem with a passive subject that becomes enabled remains, regardless if the term activating or empowering is used. It should also be noted that theorists working on the concept of empowerment also share the view that empowerment comes within the individual by taking power; thus, no one actually has the ability to empower someone else by giving them power (cf., Adams, 2003). Holstein and Gubrium's (2003) critique of the concept and how it is used is thereby somewhat misleading.

Nonetheless, I find it fruitful to talk about interviewing children as active subjects without seeing and defining the process as empowerment. My ambition is not to empower the interviewees, but to engage in interaction and making them a part of the research process. With regard to this I find Holstein and Gubrium's (2003) critique of the empowerment concept relevant, even if their term active in this context can be problematized further.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this article has been to discuss how an analysis of children's identity work in relation to everyday life in economic hardship, can fruitfully use an interpretative and reflexive interview method. In relation to my material which consists of interviews with children and adolescents living in economic hardship, I have found how shifts between frames of responsibility and carelessness – or childishness – recur as a prominent theme. I have also interpreted seemingly insignificant speech acts as position-specific strategies which can be related to the concept of framing. My aim has been to take qualitative interviewing a step further by using the active interview approach, and by redefining this approach as interactive I have discussed how Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) concept can be developed further. My use of this approach can be considered as two-fold; increasing the scope for the respondents' participation from an ethical perspective as well as extending the analytic dimension by acknowledging the interaction between us as significant. This approach in combination with concepts and themes from Erving Goffman's (1974/1986) frame analysis has shown that analyzing children's experiences of growing up in economic hardship can contain dimensions that would otherwise remain unexplored.

Taking into account different aspects of the interview, such as the respondents' use of frame breaks and how the interaction itself can be regarded as

meaningful, a widened potential in analyzing interviews emerges. Discussing how the interview situation can be regarded as a frame, and how children's narratives of everyday life can be interpreted in relation to framing, not only highlight the importance of interaction in interviews like these, but also the relevance of regarding children and adolescents as culturally competent in this context, and acknowledging them as co-constructors of knowledge. By using an interview strategy that enables self-reflection and participation in the research process, children's competences in formulating and interpreting their own experiences as significant to their identity work are acknowledged. Children's narratives, and the interaction between us in the interview situation where these narratives are partly constructed, become a meaning-making process in which the children are co-constructors of knowledge. Therefore, interactive interviewing should have a given place in childhood sociology; a perspective that in many ways emphasizes children's participation and scope for agency. Using an interactive approach can be a way to make children visible as actors in the research process, and bring about new perspectives on children's competences.

References

- Adams, R. (2003). *Social work and empowerment* (3rd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alasuutari, P. (1995). *Researching culture: Qualitative method and cultural studies*. London: Sage.
- Alasuutari, P. (2004). *Social theory and human reality*. London: Sage.
- Cocks, A. (2006). The ethical maze. Finding an inclusive path towards gaining children's agreement to research participation. *Childhood*, 13(2), 247-266.
- Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction ritual chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Daly, M., & Leonard, M. (2002). *Against all odds. Family life on a low income in Ireland*. Dublin: IPA.
- Egeberg Holmgren, L. (2008). Performing feminist affinity. Interviewing feminist men in Sweden. *Atenea*, 28(2), (forthcoming).
- Fernqvist, S., Näsman, E., & von Gerber, C. (2008). *Berörd, beskriven, frånvarande. Hur länsrättsdomar framställer barn i ekonomiska biståndsärenden*. [Affected, described, absent. On the representation of children in welfare benefits appeals]. Uppsala: Department of Sociology, Uppsala Universitet (forthcoming).
- Goffman, E. (1959/1990) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London : Penguin
- Goffman, E. (1974/1986). *Frame analysis. An essay on the organization of experience*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2003). From the individual interview to the interview society. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Postmodern interviewing* (pp. 21-49). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hockey, J., & James, A. (2003). *Social identities across the life course*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. London: Sage.
- Holstein, J.A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000). *The self we live by. Narrative identity in a postmodern world*. New York, NY. Okford University Press.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2003) *Inside interviewing. New lenses, new concerns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- James A., Jenks, C., & Prout A. (1998). *Theorizing childhood*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2008). A social constructionist framing of the research interview. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 429-443). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Kvale, S. (1997). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*. [Doing interviews]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Lee, N. (1998). Towards an immature sociology. *The Sociological Review*, 46(3), 458-482.
- Marvasti, A. (2008). Interactional constructionism. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 315-330). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Mishler, E. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Närvänen, A., & Näsman, E. (2007). Age order and children's agency. In H. Wintersberger, L. Alanen, T. Olk, & J. Qvortrup (Eds.), *Childhood, generational order and the welfare state: Exploring children's social and economic welfare* (pp. 225-253). Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Näsman, E. (1995). Vuxnas intresse av att se med barns ögon. [Adults taking children's point of view]. In L. Dahlgren & K. Hultqvist (Eds.), *Seendet och seendets villkor. En bok om barns och ungas välfärd*. [The terms of viewing. On children's and young people's welfare]. (pp. 279-302) Stockholm: HLS
- Näsman, E., & von Gerber, C. (1996). *Mamma pappa utan jobb*. [Mom dad without a job]. Stockholm: Rädda Barnen.
- Neale, B. (2002). Dialogues with children. Children, divorce and citizenship. *Childhood*, 9(4), 445-475.
- Payne, M. (1997). *Modern teoribildning i socialt arbete*. [Modern social work theory]. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.
- Prout, A. (2005). *The future of childhood: Towards the interdisciplinary study of children*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Punch, S. (2002) Research with children. The same or different from research with adults? *Childhood*, 9(3), 321-341.
- Qvortrup, J. (1994). Childhood matters. An introduction. In J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta, & H. Wintersberger (Eds.), *Childhood matters. Social theory, practice and politics* (pp. 1-23). Aldershot: Avebury.
- Rattansi, A., & Pheonix, A. (1997). Rethinking youth identities: Modernist and postmodernist frameworks. In J. Brynner, A. Furlong, & L. Chisholm (Eds.), *Youth, citizenship and social change in a European context* (pp. 121-150). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Ridge, T. (2002). *Childhood poverty and social exclusion. From a child's perspective*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. London: Teachers College Press.
- Trost, J. (2005). *Kvalitativa intervjuer*. [Qualitative interviews]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Widdicombe, S. (1998). Identity as an analysts' and a participants' resource. In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe (Eds.), *Identities in talk* (pp. 191-206). London: Sage.

Woffitt, R., & Widdicombe, S. (2006). Interaction in interviews. In P. Drew, G. Raymond, & D. Weinberg (Eds.), *Talk and interaction in social research methods* (pp. 28-50). London: Sage.

Author Note

Stina Fernqvist is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden. She is working on a research project, led by Professor Elisabet Näsman that deals with economic hardship in childhood from a child perspective.

Her thesis focuses on the issue of identity construction and children's strategies and positioning in relation to discourses of economic hardship and the welfare state. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to stina.fernqvist@soc.uu.se

Copyright 2010: Stina Fernqvist and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Fernqvist, S. (2010). (Inter)active interviewing in childhood research: On children's identity work in interviews. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1309-1327. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-6/fernqvist.pdf>
