

THE METHOD OF ETHICS-AS-PROCESS: EMBRACING AMBIVALENCE IN RESEARCH ON CHILDHOOD AND DEPORTABILITY

EL MÉTODO DE ÉTICA COMO PROCESO: ACOGIENDO LA AMBIVALENCIA EN INVESTIGACIONES SOBRE INFANCIA Y DEPORTABILIDAD

JACOB LIND*

***Abstract:** Even though ethics should not be instrumentalised, discussing ethical issues with participants and gatekeepers can nevertheless lead to new knowledge. Through examples from ethnographic research among children and families fearing deportation in Birmingham, UK and Malmö, Sweden, this article reflects upon how an ethics-as-process approach can become part of the knowledge production itself in sensitive and politicised research contexts. This is a result of the ambivalent nature of ethnographic research with vulnerable groups and the article therefore encourages researchers to embrace the ambivalences of co-constructing the field, working with gatekeepers and establishing trust and consent to enable a more transparent and reflexive knowledge production. In conclusion, it is suggested that the increased politicisation of the issue of child and family migration will make necessary that researchers, who wish to embrace this ambivalence, align with the self-expressed struggle of participants to enable high-quality participatory research among these groups.*

* Malmö University. jacob.lind@mah.se

Jacob Lind is a PhD student in the research program Migration, Urbanisation and Societal Change (MUSA) at Malmö University, Sweden. His research is part of the project 'Undocumented children's rights claims' – a multidisciplinary project on agency and contradictions between different levels of regulations and practice that reveals undocumented children's human rights funded by The Swedish Research Council (grant number: 421-2012-683).

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Resumen: *Aunque la ética no debería ser instrumentalizada, la discusión de cuestiones éticas con participantes y gatekeepers ('guardianes') puede guiarnos a nuevos conocimientos. A través de ejemplos de una investigación etnográfica con niños y familias con temor a ser deportadas realizada en Birmingham, Reino Unido, y Malmö, Suecia, este artículo reflexiona sobre cómo una aproximación de la ética como proceso puede convertirse en parte de la producción de conocimiento en contextos sensibles y de investigación politizada. Esto es resultado de la naturaleza ambivalente de la investigación etnográfica con grupos vulnerables y, el artículo, por lo tanto, anima a los investigadores a acoger las ambivalencias de co-construir el campo a través del trabajo con gatekeepers ('guardianes') y estableciendo confianza y consentimiento para posibilitar una producción de conocimiento más transparente y reflexiva. En conclusión, se sugiere que ante la creciente politización del área de los niños y las familias migrantes será necesario que los investigadores que deseen acoger esta ambivalencia, se alineen con la lucha expresada por los participantes para facilitar el desarrollo de investigación participante de gran calidad entre estos grupos.*

Palabras clave: *Ética como proceso; etnografía; deportabilidad; niñez; ambivalencia*

In this article I discuss how the approach of ethics-as-process (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002) can become a method in itself in ethnographic fieldwork about politically sensitive issues – in addition to the main function of the approach to make sure ethical standards are being upheld throughout the whole process of participatory research. I do this by drawing on my experiences of conducting cross-national comparative ethnographic fieldwork among families fearing deportation in Birmingham, UK, and Malmö, Sweden. I argue that the centrality of practices such as obtaining access, trust and consent within participatory research with vulnerable migrants necessitates continuous conversations about ethics with gatekeepers and participants, which can then become an additional source of knowledge about the field.

However, I do not intend to instrumentalise ethics and degrade it to be just a methodological tool. Practicing good research ethics

is an end in itself and should not be reduced to a means to achieve specific goals. Central in ethical discussions is of course how research affects those involved in our studies and the wider implications of the research. Nevertheless, the experience from my own research shows that during these continuous conversations about ethics with participants and gatekeepers, we together produced new knowledge that also helped me gain a deeper understanding of the politics of migration. This provides a secondary but, nonetheless, valuable outcome from engaging in discussions on ethics.

A total of 28 families participated in my study, 12 in Sweden and 16 in the UK, and I interviewed at least one parent from each family. I conducted interviews and (to a various extent) participatory observation with children in 12 of these families, 6 in Sweden and 6 in the UK. The participating children's ages ranged from 7 to 18 years old (one had just turned 18 at the time of our interview). In the remaining 16 families I only interviewed the parents since the children did not want to participate, the parents did not want me to ask them or they were too young to talk to directly.¹ The children all shared the same position of being considered 'deportable', 'irregularised' or 'undocumented'² in the sense that they did not have a legal right to remain in the host country, or they had experienced living in this situation in the past and were now at different stages of applying for leave to remain – however, still feeling the very real threat of deportation in their everyday lives since a negative decision from the UK Home Office or the Swedish Migration Agency could potentially lead to deportation at any time. Their everyday lives were under constant pressure due to their 'deportability' as De Genova (2002) described it in his seminal article.

¹ The informants were recruited at activities by participating NGOs. In some cases gatekeepers asked people they considered appropriate to approach on my behalf, and after I had become more involved in the NGOs work I approached new participants myself. In other cases snowball sampling occurred where participants recommended their friends to participate. In the UK the parents originated mainly from former colonies such as Jamaica, Nigeria and India. In Sweden they originated from Afghanistan, Albania and Kosovo.

² These terms are used interchangeably in the text. I prefer to use the passive term 'irregularised migrants', instead of the more commonly used 'irregular migrants', to emphasise that irregularity is a position constructed by state policies. For example, in some cases, a person's temporary permission to stay may be terminated on the basis of changes in the immigration rules outside of the person's control.

Irregularised migrants arguably belong to the research category of 'vulnerable' social groups (see Liamputtong, 2007) and irregularised migrant children are 'in a position of triple vulnerability: as children above all, as migrants, and as undocumented migrants' (PICUM, 2008). The concept 'vulnerable' is used in this article to position it within a certain methodological debate, but it is important to emphasize that by using this concept researchers risk pushing the agency and resilience expressed by people labelled as 'vulnerable' to the background. As previous research has shown, irregularised migrant children can be extraordinarily resilient and express agency in their vulnerable position (Ascher and Wahlström Smith, 2016; Dreby, 2015; Sigona and Hughes, 2012). In my research, I have discussed the duality of the political agency that these children express in their everyday lives (see Lind, 2016). The children experienced being labelled a 'migrant' or 'deportable', which upset some of the children born in the UK and was a source of anger that led them to act out political agency through contesting the subject position of 'deportable migrant', as well as through sustaining the inclusion into society they experienced in their everyday lives.

My interest in studying the phenomena of irregular migration from the point of view of those who have experienced it stems from my on-going involvement in migrants' rights activism in Sweden. In this context, the line is never completely clear-cut for participants between your position as a researcher and alternatively a potential support person and activist (Darling, 2014). Ethnographic research is a fundamentally emotional endeavour (Davies and Spencer, 2010) and ethnographic researchers are always in an ambivalent position in relation to one's participants (see Weidman, 1986), especially when conducting research among vulnerable groups. Arguably, the more politicised the issue studied is, the more work this ambivalence requires of the involved persons, and in the case of activist or (participatory) action research the ambivalence is further amplified since the researcher is accountable to multiple actors and often positioned simultaneously as a support worker, activist and researcher etc. I argue that handling ambivalences becomes a central activity in ethnographic research that utilises the ethics-as-process approach, and therefore throughout the article I discuss what consequences my positioning had and how I approached the ethical ambivalence I experienced. Rather than trying (in vain) to eliminate these power discrepancies and ambivalences I argue

that they should be recognised as a source of reflection and ethical reflexivity.

The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussion on ethics-as-process by showing how this approach can lead to new knowledge when discussing ethical issues with gatekeepers and participants. In this way I want to initiate a discussion on a possible 'method' of ethics-as-process, which understands the concept as not just a methodological approach to ethics but also a tool, or method, for producing knowledge. Talking openly about the knowledge produced through the ethics-as-process approach without instrumentalising it can hopefully improve the quality of research among vulnerable groups for the benefit of the participants themselves, and help researchers deal with emotional challenges of ambivalence stemming mainly from aspects of positionality and privilege, and become more politically relevant in their work. In so doing, I hope to also contribute to wider discussions on research ethics and methods within migration as well as childhood research through an exploration of the specific context of deportability.

In the next section I briefly review the literature on ethics and research with undocumented migrants, children and other vulnerable groups, before I define my conceptualisation of the method of ethics-as-process. Drawing on experiences from my fieldwork, I continue to discuss what implications an ethics-as-process approach had for the co-construction of my field. I then argue for how the phenomena of deportability and childhood can be researched in line with this approach through grounded, micro-scale ethnography and explore in more detail the researcher's position in this field. Furthermore, I discuss some of the consequences of the ethics-as-process approach for building trust with and obtaining consent from gatekeepers, such as NGOs, and participants. Throughout the article I give examples of knowledge that I gained through discussions with gatekeepers and participants about those ethical issues; discussions necessitated by the ethics-as-process approach and fuelled by the ambivalences this kind of research involve. The article concludes with a reflection about what the field of deportability demands politically of an ethnographic researcher and the need to be aligned with the self-expressed political positionality and struggles of participants to obtain access and be able to handle the ambivalence of grounded ethnographic work among highly politicised and vulnerable groups of migrant children and families.

1. PRACTICING ETHICS-AS-PROCESS: HARM-AVOIDANCE AND MUTUAL GAIN

The ethical implications of participatory research about deportability have been discussed to a certain extent in earlier research, where it has been highlighted how the deportability of participants increases the complexity of issues like confidentiality, researcher-participant relationship and how to disseminate one's findings in a responsible way (Bernhard and Young, 2009; De Genova, 2005; Düvell, Triandafyllidou, and Vollmer, 2009). The ethics of research with vulnerable groups, including migrants and refugees, have been examined more widely, including discussions on the importance of sensitive approaches and how these can be combined with effectiveness in research design (Liamputtong, 2007; Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007; Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman, 2010). Lastly, the ethics of participatory research with children have been even more thoroughly explored, which include child perspectives on a full range of ethical issues in qualitative research (Cocks, 2006; Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012; Thomas and O'kane, 1998). However, there is limited literature that specifically discusses the ethics of doing research with deportable children and families in detail, which is a conversation this article seeks to contribute to, while simultaneously initiating a discussion on the method of ethics-as-process. Before I engage in examples from my fieldwork of how I approached key ethical issues and discuss what I learned from them about my research topics, however, I need to define my conceptualisation of the method of ethics-as-process.

My argument in this article builds on the work of Cutcliffe and Ramcharan (2002), who termed the 'ethics-as-process' approach. They argue that ethics in qualitative research should be viewed as a process, where the researcher discusses ethical questions occurring within the research process with participants continuously throughout the research, rather than something static, which could be accomplished by, for example, stating intentions before entering the field by ticking a box in an ethical review application form. There is an on-going discussion about the need for continuous reflection on ethical issues throughout ethnographic research (see for example American Anthropological Association, 2012). Here I primarily relate to Cutcliffe and Ramcharan's (2002) conceptualisation of the issue since their discussion relates to the work of ethics committees, which

are diligently scrutinizing research among vulnerable groups. The ethics-as-process approach also covers many different 'techniques that can be used to address ethical concerns in qualitative research' (Cutcliffe and Ramcharan, 2002:1001) including the issues of co-constructing the field, working with gatekeepers, building up trust and obtaining consent, which are discussed in the present article.

The underlying ethical principle for the ethics-as-process approach is the axiom of 'do no harm', especially in relation to the risks of re-traumatising interviewees in qualitative interviews with vulnerable people. Cutcliff and Ramcharan (2002) argue that the attitude of ethical vetting boards is often too cautious and list examples of ways interviewees have said to benefit from engaging in interviews about sensitive issues. Mackenzie, Mcdowell and Pittaway (2007) argue in a similar vein that ethical practice within research with vulnerable groups needs to move beyond a harm-minimization approach and also consider how research can bring about reciprocal benefits for its participants.

These two guiding principles, harm-avoidance and mutual gain, materialise within the field of deportability in the following ways: The question of harm-avoidance primarily concerns making sure the safety of the participants is guaranteed during the fieldwork, i.e. that my work in no way gives the migration authorities any information of their whereabouts that could be used to facilitate detention and/or deportation (De Genova, 2002:422), and that my representation of their everyday life practices does not add to their already stigmatised position within public opinion (Düvell, Triandafyllidou and Vollmer, 2009:235). The question of mutual gain concerns how I can ensure that my participants benefit from my research; both directly during the research process and indirectly in how it affects public opinion and policy.

These issues are dilemmas that will never be conclusively resolved. Still, the point I argue for here is that the controversial and politicised nature of the research field of deportability and childhood necessitates ethnographic research within this field to adhere to ethical principles such as harm-avoidance and mutual gain to help guide the researcher in every methodological decision being made. Gaining the trust of participants and then finding ways to relate to them, not only as a researcher, but also as a support person when they may ask you for help, is at the centre of ethnographic research in this field. One's ability as a researcher to be able to conduct research

depends on the process of practicing ethics in this ambivalent space. I argue that the practice of ethics-as-process with harm-avoidance and mutual gain at its centre is a potentially mutually beneficial methodology within deportability, and this is plausibly the case also for research with vulnerable children and families as well as migration research at large.

To clarify further the empirical focus of this article I need to discuss another key concept, namely 'irregularity' or 'deportability'. Besides a discussion about definitions or categorisations, the following section is also simultaneously the first empirical example I want to introduce of when the ethics-as-process approach helped me gain new knowledge.

2. CO-CONSTRUCTING AND DELIMITING THE FIELD AROUND DEPORTABILITY

The co-construction of the field and how I represented the participants became a central ethical issue in my research. I call it 'co-constructing' the field to emphasise that my delimitation was a result of on-going conversations with my participants. I had to spend a lot of time discussing with gatekeepers what people would be relevant to approach; too narrow a definition would have excluded people who may want to take part, and too broad a definition could potentially make the result less relevant for the people it was meant to be of benefit for.

In Sweden, irregularised migrants themselves have contributed to establishing a relatively clear-cut category of 'papperslösa'³, which translates into English as 'without papers'. 'Papperslösa' consists to a very large degree of asylum seekers who have been refused asylum but have avoided deportation and stayed in Sweden without leave to remain (see Lundberg and Söderman, 2015; Sager, 2011; Strange

³ However, recent political developments around so called 'vulnerable EU-citizens' who are begging in the streets and often overstay their three month right of residence in Sweden as EU-citizens have opened up a discussion about the categorisation since government representatives have tried to argue that they are not 'papperslösa', in an attempt to exclude them from the right to education (Lind and Persdotter, 2017).

and Lundberg, 2014). In the UK, the categories are much more diverse; there, an 'undocumented' migrant usually refers to visa-overstayers, whereas migrants who have unsuccessfully claimed asylum and who are either hiding from the migration authorities to avoid deportation or challenging this refusal through legal means, usually refer to themselves as 'refused asylum seekers' (see Ruhs and Anderson, 2006; Bloch, 2013; Sigona and Hughes, 2012).

In Sweden, 'papperslösa' is a category that has been recognised in recent legislation, which has extended the right to healthcare and education for this category (Nielsen, 2016), whereas in the UK, similar debates generally concern 'destitute migrants', including migrants with various legal statuses. As practically all of my participants described, seeking asylum in the UK usually meant navigating the slow processes of what they saw as an incompetent bureaucracy, combined with poor immigration advice by what they experienced as corrupt solicitors. This results in a shared precariousness with many people who are not seeking asylum or who do not know what their exact status may be at the moment. Recent developments in Sweden, where the asylum system is put under unprecedented pressure and new harsher immigration legislation has been introduced, are likely to further blur the levels of precariousness between asylum seekers and 'papperslösa' (see Crouch, 2015). What I learned in the field through talking with gatekeepers and participants was that many people with various legal statuses in the UK, or who are variously positioned in relation to the Home Office, are more or less likely to be deported and do more or less fear being deported, and the likelihood does not necessarily correspond with the level of fear. Neither is it usually possible to say how likely it is that someone will be deported sometime soon.

According to most support workers I met in the UK, families with children especially are less likely to be deported, if nothing else because of the relatively large amount of work involved for the migration authorities to make it happen. However, at the same time, as a mother from Jamaica expressed it, when discussing the impact of deportability on her community, the impression is that 'half of Britain is afraid of being deported'. At the end of my fieldwork in Sweden, this notion that families are less deportable than I had been led to believe from my experiences in the UK, was suddenly shattered. In Malmö, at the end of 2016, the police specifically started to target families from the Balkans in their efforts to increase the numbers

of deportations, in response to the government's new restrictive migration policies (Regeringen, 2016). In August 2017, the police made the controversial decision to enter a summer camp organised by the Church of Sweden in Malmö where five irregularised migrant families were arrested, which stirred up national debate on the need for sanctuary zones for these children (see *The Local*, 2017). At the time of writing, the police have deported three out of my twelve participating families in Malmö: One family of four who had stayed in Sweden for three years, one family of four who had stayed in Sweden for two years and one family of five who also had stayed in Sweden for three years but who had been refused asylum in Sweden one time earlier 13 years ago. The children in all three families spoke fluent Swedish and wanted nothing but to stay in Sweden. Another three families have currently at least one family member in detention or are reporting to the police regularly as the police is preparing for them to be deported. In contrast, several of the families in the UK have received leave to remain after I finished my fieldwork.

The methodological and ethical implications of this for research among vulnerable migrant children are that one must carefully consider what consequences your categories and delimitations will have for how you interact with the field, but also with how you represent it. In my case I came to understand that amongst all the variations of legal statuses that I encountered, the fear of being deported was still the underlying main concern of the families and children I talked to, both in Sweden and the UK. Therefore it made most sense to include anyone who at some point had been avoiding the migration authorities because of this fear since they all still experienced that they potentially could be deported whenever the migration authorities chose to say so. Such an approach does not leave out the need for the researcher to conceptualise the field, but it draws primarily on the experiences and knowledge of the participants themselves.

The ethics-as-process approach involves continuous discussions about ethical issues, such as the question of delimitation, with gatekeepers and participants. Through these discussions I gained knowledge that was central to my understanding of the field – namely my argument that the fear of deportation is the central aspect of how the category 'irregularised migrants' can be defined in practice. Hence, the centrality and ethical nature of the question of delimitation turned the process of discussing this issue with the

gatekeepers and participants into a part of the knowledge production. In this way the ethics-as-process approach also, secondarily, became a method for collecting data.

3. STUDYING DEPORTABILITY AND CHILDHOOD THROUGH GROUNDED, MICRO-SCALE ETHNOGRAPHY

Before I give further examples of what I learned from practicing ethics in the field, I will briefly discuss the methodological approach of my research project in more detail. I do this partly to show the methodological context within which my reflections on ‘the method of ethics-as-process’ came about, but also to position the article in relation to wider discussions on research ethics and methods within migration as well as childhood research. The framework for my fieldwork was to compare the everyday experiences, rights claiming and political agency in deportability of children and families in Malmö, Sweden, and Birmingham, UK; two examples of ‘smaller, more provincial and less flashy cities’, which need to be studied more in comparative migration research (Martiniello, 2013:14, 17). The basic idea was to get in touch with families at risk of deportation, preferably with children old enough that I could talk to them directly, through working with local organisations that had continuous contact with this group. According to Jørgensen (2015:13), this kind of cross-national comparative ethnography enables an exploration of themes and topics in relation to different local policies and practices as well as ‘contra-posing discourses used in different contexts’.

The sizes of the cities⁴ are very different, but this did not impact my research to any larger extent since the networks of NGOs supporting irregularised migrants in both cities were relatively small. It was also similarly difficult to get in touch with families relevant for my project. In the UK there are more irregularised migrants than in Sweden, both in relative and absolute numbers,

⁴ The city of Malmö, approximately 0.34 million inhabitants in 158 km², has a third of the city of Birmingham’s population, approximately 1.1 million inhabitants in 268 km². (See <http://malmo.se/kommun-politik/statistik/befolkning.html> and <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/census>)

but my understanding from discussing these differences with activists and participants is that in Birmingham it is easier to survive in this situation without the support from NGOs, most likely because of a larger and more accessible informal labour market, and in this way the number of families getting such support was not as different as the overall number of irregularised migrants in each city in total.

When comparing Sweden and the UK I came across the effects of two similar, but in several ways also very different, legal and societal contexts. By comparing irregularised migrant children's everyday life experiences I gained an understanding of the particular effects these different legislations and societal norms and values have from ground-up. This approach can be described as belonging to what Dobson (2009) calls 'micro-scale methodologies'. Through conducting a form of micro-scale methodology I aimed to provide room for children themselves to have a voice, which would then enable me to discuss, among other things, how one could understand their political agency in deportability from a position of the everyday (Lind, 2016). This follows the approach of Elwood and Mitchell (2012:2) who state that children's 'dialogues of the everyday, can constitute a significant (yet under-examined) space for their politics and their formation as political actors'.

When setting up my fieldwork I wanted to avoid the potential harm of what Greene and Hogan (2005:17) call 'smash and grab approaches to collecting data' where not enough time is spent to enable a trustful relationship with the participating children, which is common within childhood studies. Arguably, such an approach is often a consequence of researchers neglecting the need for ethical reflexivity about one's own ethically ambivalent position. The main practical way I chose to try and avoid this was to establish working relationships with local NGOs and get access to participants through their activities.

In general, the ethnographic approach is more and more established within research with children (Tisdall and Punch, 2012:252). Here, I am inspired by Beazley et al. (2009:369), who argue that 'inductive, grounded and rights-based research can contribute to theoretical understandings that reflect and enable deeper understandings of children's lives and priorities as human beings. In this sense, "being grounded" is both good research and good human rights'. As Beazley et al. argue (2009:370), this is

important since children have a 'right to be properly researched', a right which children derive from several adjacent rights in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. When I started my research it became clear that the micro-scale level I wanted to explore demanded an inductive or grounded approach in line with the suggestions of Beazley and her co-authors. This approach also seemed well suited for practicing ethics-as-process within the field of deportability and childhood since it enabled continuous communication with participants about harm-avoidance and mutual gain. This in turn raised important questions about the researcher's position as well as power-relationships, which are of central importance for my overall argument of the method of ethics-as-process.

4. THE RESEARCHER'S POSITION IN THE FIELD OF DEPORTABILITY

Central to a discussion about ethics in research with vulnerable groups is the question of the researcher's position and relationship to the field and one's participants. Irregularised migrant families are often in need of different kinds of support to be able to endure the hardships of being threatened with deportation. Therefore, in my project, I found it necessary to employ a kind of 'activist research' methodology, to enable an ethnographic study of irregularised children and families' every day lives. Hale (2008:20-21) has developed a framework for activist research, where he states that 'activist research methods regularly yield special insight, insider knowledge, and experience-based understanding [...] that otherwise would be impossible to achieve'. Inspired by standpoint-feminists, he argues that for activist researchers, the validity of their results is potentially stronger since their work is under scrutiny from an academic audience as well as the activists and participants they engage with.

Hale (2008:3) does not distinguish the concept of 'activist research' from more well-known concepts such as 'action research' and 'participatory action research' and his point is not, as I understand it, to construct a radically new methodological approach. Rather, the concept 'activist research' is a way to conceptualise the problems and potentials of doing research in settings where the researcher

has an active engagement in a politicised issue on a personal level with a goal to achieve social change. The activist research approach of aligning oneself with the self-expressed everyday struggles of the participants does not, however, mean that the research agenda is already set and the researcher is only looking for the findings one can obtain that will fit certain presuppositions of what will benefit the cause one is engaged in. Rather, it primarily influences the research questions asked and how one relates to and becomes accountable in the field to increase transparency of the knowledge production one engages in.

The activist research approach had certain specific consequences in my fieldwork. In some cases, in both countries, the participants asked me to help them with practical issues concerning their situation and I tried to help the best I could while still balancing the ambivalence of the dual position as researcher and activist. On some occasions I supported participants as they took part in political campaigns and activities but also at times acted as a support person when a participant went to sign at the Home Office, took part in an activity they did not want to attend by themselves or was detained. De Genova (2013:252) argues for the lack of neutral ground in this kind of research.

The momentum of the struggle itself compels us, one way or the other, to 'take a side'. Indeed, the larger juridical regimes of citizenship, denizenship, and alienage configure us to be always – already located within the nexus of inequalities that are at stake in these conflicts. Investigating and producing knowledge about these struggles merely implicates us further, more directly, more immediately.

In my study, the grounded, micro-scale, ethnographic approach necessitated that I could show my participants that I also wanted to contest the 'deportation regime' (De Genova and Peutz, 2010) and already supported their struggle to cope within this regime in their everyday lives. However, I am also always positioned simultaneously as a researcher. Activist research acknowledges this ambivalent dual positionality, and potentially enables more reflexivity about issues of objectivity, transparency and power inequalities.

Hence, the activist research approach does not undo the ever-present power discrepancies between researchers and participants. The activist researcher is just as privileged as any other researcher, but inherent in the approach is a need to continuously discuss the

objectives and implications of one's research. My positioning as an activist was particularly important when negotiating access and establishing trust. After I had started to find participants I realised that none of them initially seemed to view me as someone they would ask for help to solve any of their immediate problems. The gatekeepers I worked with were the primary persons they would go to for advice and support. I was rather talked about as 'that guy who is writing a book'. Initially I was struggling with trying not to scare people off by bringing my notebook out too much before people knew me a bit better and had discussed what I was actually doing in more detail. But at later stages of the fieldwork, as my 'activist' position or supportiveness to their situation had been acknowledged, and they in some cases had started to ask me for help with their practical problems, I rather moved towards practices that would emphasise my researcher position to remind the participants again of my work, such as taking notes more overtly (see DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010:164) or engage more often in discussions on what they expected from me as a researcher and what (small) impact my research may have on their situation.

In light of the above theoretical and methodological discussions, I will now move on to examples (in addition to the examples I already gave when discussing delimitation) of knowledge gained through conversations about ethical issues with my participants and gatekeepers – examples that, I argue, support and explain further my suggested concept of the method of ethics-as-process. These examples also serve as practical reflections on how one can relate to the field in research with vulnerable children and families – reflections that aims to contribute to the wider discussion on research ethics and methods within migration as well as childhood research.

5. NGOS AS GATEKEEPERS WHEN ACCESSING THE FIELD OF DEPORTABILITY

To cooperate with NGOs for access and to gain 'trust by affiliation' through them was absolutely pivotal for my research. By this I mean the process where participants chose to talk to me after being asked by the NGO representatives to do so, since they trusted

that the NGOs had chosen to refer them to me for good reasons (see Emmel et al., 2007). In the UK, many of them initially referred to me as ‘Jacob from [NGO]’. This does not mean that they were not aware that I was a researcher – we discussed this continuously throughout my fieldwork and afterwards as I conducted respondent validation where I discussed my written texts with the participants – but it rather shows how important those NGOs are for the participants’ everyday life. In Sweden, the people I met seemed to have a greater awareness of what it meant that I am a researcher, the reason for this may be that they knew me during a longer period of time. The important lesson to learn from this, however, is to never take for granted that your participants understand what you do as a researcher but to constantly discuss it as a part of the ethics-as-process approach.

There were a few instances where NGO representatives did not want to help me out. One gatekeeper in Birmingham chose not to participate since she was afraid that people would not feel able to say no if she asked them on my behalf. In this way she helped me realise that we can never completely come around this issue of ‘trust by affiliation’ when we cooperate with intermediaries such as NGOs to help us find participants for our research. That is one reason why I appreciated when potential participants chose not to take part in my research, since that implied that they felt that they had a choice, which hopefully means that the ones who said ‘yes’ felt the same. In Malmö, one organisation supporting irregularised migrants has recently had negative experiences of researchers who acted unethically and intrusively in the eyes of many members of the group by gaining access to their meetings in what was perceived as disingenuous ways⁵ and therefore it was not an option for me to approach them for help with recruiting participants at their meetings. However, individual members of the group contributed in making contact with families they were supporting directly.

The lesson learned from this for research with vulnerable migrants generally, is that working with NGOs holds a lot of potential for an ethically sensitive approach to accessing this field. However, it is crucial to have an open discussion with gatekeepers about the aims,

⁵ See a blog post by the researchers (DeBono, Magnusson and Rönnqvist, 2015) and the reply in the comment section by a representative of the NGO for an insight into this conflict.

methods and expected outcomes of the research, and not be afraid of the possibility of being rejected. Rather than a failure, rejections may be understood as an opportunity to gain knowledge by further reflecting upon one's work and in what way we as researchers can be more in tune with what is happening in the world we aim to study. The possibility of rejection is part of the ambivalence included in accessing the field and to accept rejection is important if we follow the guiding principles of harm-avoidance and mutual gain. Similarly to the question of how to delimit the field, continuous discussions with gatekeepers about access is a central aspect of ethics-as-process and an opportunity to gain important knowledge about the field in itself. Also, having to repeatedly reformulate what the purpose of my study is and how it could impact my participants' situation helped me understand better what my project actually would be about.

6. BUILDING TRUST WITHIN THE FIELD OF DEPORTABILITY

In this section I will discuss how trustful relationships can be built with vulnerable migrant families. Discussions about delimitation and potential rejections by gatekeepers are a potential source of knowledge, and they are also closely connected to the issue of trust. Trust, or rapport, goes beyond the question of access; most importantly it is a way of talking about the relationship that is built between the researcher and the research subject (Liamputtong, 2007:56). To be able to talk to children directly I first needed to gain the trust of their parents, therefore I always interviewed the parents at least one time before any of the child-interviews were conducted. At the end of the parent-interviews I asked the parents if they would allow me to speak to any of their children, and not all parents agreed. However, for the ones who did, the impression they got of me during our interview, together with recommendations from NGO representatives or other participants, was enough for them to decide that they would let me talk to their child. Most of the parents who only had children below five years of age I only interviewed once, but a few of them came regularly to various events at NGOs and we had informal conversations over time as well. I met most of the families that had older children on several occasions and a few of the children in the UK I saw on an almost weekly basis during the 6

months I spent there, whereas in Sweden I met some of the families only occasionally over 3 years.

Many of the participants, including a few of the older children, both in Birmingham and Malmö, initially asked me questions about my thoughts on migration politics or their situation as a way of checking my position. One teenage girl in Malmö asked me the first time we met if I thought my work would make any difference and if my book would also be sent to the politicians. Here, it was the children who asked me to position myself within the framework of their struggles to make sure they could trust me and wanted to talk to me. In those cases it became clear that I needed to express thoroughly my support in their everyday struggles against being positioned as deportable (see Lind, 2016) and explain some of my personal opinions about the immigration system and related issues (for similar discussions about this see De Genova, 2005:13f; Mackenzie et al., 2007:316). This made me realise that the research I was trying to conduct would not have been possible in the grounded way I intended if I had held a political standpoint that did not align with the claims and injustices the participants expressed.

The ambivalence of my position as a researcher within this field was further amplified through the fact that the participants also generally asked early on what the result of the research would be. I then found myself in a complicated situation where I tried to be honest and not raise any expectations, but simultaneously not discourage them from taking part by venting my own doubts too much about the book just ending up on a shelf collecting dust. Again, I argue that this ambivalence is also nothing that one as a researcher should try and get rid of, but rather engage with and reflect upon all through the research process. The participants' questions about the ethical and political implications of my research helped me better understand my own position as well as how they related to their situation as potentially deportable.

By coming back to these questions repeatedly as a part of the 'ethics-as-process' approach, and often on the initiative of the participants, I was inspired to try and write other kinds of texts outside of academia, parallel with the construction of academic papers, that engaged more directly in the current debates⁶. This has

⁶ See for example a number of debate articles I have co-written (Anderson et al. 2016; Lind et al. 2016; Lundberg et al., 2015).

made it possible for me to say with a little more confidence that the writing I do may benefit people in deportability at least indirectly, since the slow production of academic texts can be hard to justify sometimes when arguing for one's research in the field.

7. OBTAINING CONSENT WITHIN THE FIELD OF DEPORTABILITY

A specific aspect of trust building is consent, and obtaining consent from children is complicated. Depending on children's age and maturity, various levels of direct consent can be achieved and usually parents act as gatekeepers to the children as legal guardians (for a discussion on the complexities of parental consent in childhood research see Bogolub, 2005; Kendrick, Steckley, and Lerpiniere, 2008). During fieldwork I experienced that the children enjoyed, or at least did not mind, talking to me. The parents acted as gatekeepers, clearly taking the needs of their children into consideration, but still often gave me access to talk to them. There did not seem to be any direct correlation between the level of fear of deportation and the strength of parents' gatekeeping; it varied from parent to parent regardless of their personal circumstances. In this way, I had two layers of gatekeepers that I had to negotiate access with: NGOs and parents. This may seem like a complex and demanding situation, but my experience was rather that it made me less ambivalent towards causing any harm since I was being held accountable towards multiple adults who cared for these children. I argue that 'challenges in the field' like multiple gatekeepers, just as rejections, is an asset for us as researchers since it forces us to be more reflexive and engage more deeply in ethical discussions which can also help us gain new knowledge.

When interviewing children, the question of relationships and positionalities in the field becomes immediately critical. As I was visiting the house of the family in Birmingham that I had engaged with the most, a social worker came by. She asked the 7-year-old girl who I was and she replied that I was 'a friend'. A boy in another family that I also got to know rather well included me in a social map he was constructing for me and said 'you bought me pizza so you'll be close to the centre of the circle'. The issue of becoming

friends with participants has been thoroughly discussed within ethnographic research (for a review see Taylor, 2011:7) where both the benefits and problems of informant-friendships are highlighted. My experience of attempting to study children's everyday lives was that it was the children who defined me as a friend initially, not the other way around. As I was hanging out in their homes or participating in daylong activities together with them, it seemed unavoidable that they started to regard me as a friend, or as someone they interacted with on a personal level and not just relate to as a researcher, and I do not find this to be inherently problematic. Rather, it is yet another issue which leads to ambivalence for us as researchers because of the (in the case of children increased) power discrepancies in our relationships. To get rid of the ambivalence I would have had to distance myself further from the children. To avoid becoming a friend I would have had to abstain from engaging in activities like playing games or going on day-trips together. However, this would have made it much harder to conduct the in-depth thick descriptive study necessary for the research, and in my case I believe such an approach would have impacted the quality of my findings in a negative way.

When I first tried to interview the 7-year-old girl I asked her about how it had been to live in London before, and this made her upset; 'Mom is telling you secrets!' she said. Even though this information was not very sensitive in my eyes, this made me think twice about my practice of talking to the parents before talking to the children. However, my experience is that in most cases children are likely to trust you if you gain the trust of their parents and have a generous attitude towards their thoughts, feelings and needs. It can also be the other way around; as you start interacting with children, and their parents see that they enjoy your company, the parents can become more willing to participate. Children choose their own ways of relating to researchers and adults in general, and the important thing for us as researchers is to be flexible to the framework for the relationship that the children draw up (Bushin, 2007).

I established iterative consent (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway, 2007) both with the children directly as well as with their parents and I am continuously conducting respondent validation (to the extent it is possible) with the parents on the texts that I am writing. Consent builds on the understanding that participants are truly able to withdraw from the study at any time. This is an

uncomfortable part of research ethics, but again it is necessary not to shy away from the possibility that participants may withdraw. By embracing the potential risk of participants wanting to withdraw rather than fearing it, I came to reflect more thoroughly about my motives and incentives for conducting research. According to the ethics-as-process approach, the establishing of trust is not just a means for enabling an interview; rather, it is a continuous process, and it can be a part of the knowledge creation in itself through bringing about and demanding further reflexivity and self reflection.

8. CONCLUSION

This article has discussed various practical and ethical challenges encountered in the field while conducting research among children and families fearing deportation in the UK and Sweden. It showed some of the complexities involved when trying to define the field of deportability and problematized how to gain trust and obtain consent within this politicised field, both with gatekeepers such as NGOs and with participants. Through this account of how I approached ethical dilemmas in the field, the aim has been to discuss how the ethics-as-process approach, when put into practice, can become a research method in itself. This approach to the ambivalences within the field of deportability and the extra carefulness it implied, led to constructive conversations, which brought about further self reflection and gave me important insights that informed the direction of my study.

To discuss «barriers or challenges found “in the field”» — one theme of this special issue — is also to illustrate *how* such challenges (such as difficulties to delimit the field, the risk of rejection and multiple gatekeepers) may not be understood primarily as problems, even though they can be the cause of much ambivalence. They are rather an invitation to reflect and gain a deeper understanding about the field of study. In many cases, I argue, what we see as barriers or challenges are often opportunities that the field brings to us but that we are not yet able to decipher since our knowledge about it is still limited.

Even though ethics must not be instrumentalised and reduced to just a tool, I have argued for increased transparency in how

the ethics-as-process approach can lead to new knowledge and practically become a method in itself in ethnographic research among vulnerable groups. At the centre of this argument and the discussions prompted by my approach lies the question of the position of the researcher. My experience has been that if I wanted to engage on a micro-scale level through grounded ethnography with the issue of deportability, and not shy away from the ambivalences I experienced during my research, it was necessary that I could show the participants that I had already beforehand aligned myself with the struggles of the participants. It was the high level of politicisation of the issue of irregular migration that in many ways created this need for me to position myself, and I argue that the current increasing level of politicisation of migration issues in general will push more research projects in the direction of an activist or (participatory) action research approach to enable micro-scale, grounded ethnographies of high quality among migrant families, children and youth.

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