



Inviting the messy: Drawing methods and ‘children’s voices’

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Abstract

This article engages with the current debate in childhood research on children’s voices and representation in the research process. In this discussion, the frequent use of drawing techniques in childhood research is often highlighted as especially problematic. While agreeing that there is a need to critically examine the concept of ‘children’s voices’ and the production of ‘voices’ in research, the author argues for the possibility of and need for reflexive and creative research enabling the ‘voicing’ of others – such as children – and the possibilities of a sociological analysis of drawing methods. The argument is elaborated with a presentation and discussion of a current research project on children and care in Sweden. The author discusses two of the methods used in interviews with children – a draw-your-day exercise and concentric circles of closeness – which together help the child and the researcher narrativize practices and relationships of care that would otherwise be obscured. While the narratives that emerge cannot be viewed as providing ‘authentic’ insights into the caring situation of the child, they can be regarded as contributing to a more complex and multi-layered picture of care, which is a valuable contribution to the research field of family and interpersonal relationships.

Keywords

Care, children’s voices, complexity of voice, visual methods

Introduction

Recent debates in social science studies of childhood have questioned the way ‘children’s voice’ has come to be used in childhood research (e.g. James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Lewis, 2010; Spyrou, 2011; Uprichard, 2010). As James (2007) argues, there is a tendency to slip into arguments of childhood research as somehow representing ‘authentic’ voices of children, which risk simplifying and reducing the complexity of children as social actors. In a recent article, Spyrou (2011) argues that in order for childhood research to deal with the problem of representation, it is necessary to critically examine the

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research process itself, that is, the process through which ‘children’s voices’ are produced. For example, he points to the common use of visual – and especially drawing – methods in research with children, methods that seem to strengthen the view that it is possible to uncover the ‘authentic’ voice of the child.

A critical stance towards the ‘children’s voice’ discourse should not imply, however, simply dismissing research that attempts to incorporate children’s narratives. This, I argue, would mean missing out on the changing perspectives on social research that ‘new childhood studies’ have brought. In this article, I discuss the need for reflexive research processes that, as Spyrou says, ‘accepts the messiness, ambiguity, polyvocality, non-factuality and multi-layered nature of meaning in “stories” ’ (Spyrou, 2011: 162; see also Smart, 2009). I do so by presenting some methodological issues arising from an ongoing project on children and care in Sweden. In the project I have used a mixed-methods approach (Gabb, 2010; Mason, 2006), combining two drawing techniques in the interviews with children. These drawing methods do not aim to uncover ‘authentic’ voices of the participating children, but rather, are crucial in allowing the complexities of children’s narratives on care to emerge. The aim of this article is, thus, to show how a sociological interpretation of drawing methods – highlighted through a particular empirical case – can allow complex ‘children’s voices’ to challenge and further expand the scientific body of knowledge.

Drawing methods and ‘voice’

Visual research using drawing methods with children seems to be particularly sensitive to discussions of ‘children’s voices’ and authenticity. The reason for this, I argue, can be traced on the one hand to the historical context of the ‘voice’ discourse in general, and on the other to the history and context of drawing methods.

First, there are strong political reasons for a ‘children’s voice’ discourse. Children’s rights have risen high on international and national political agendas, and the ‘new childhood studies’ have been a powerful tool in bringing the ‘silenced’ voices of children into the debate (Christensen and James, 2008b; Lewis, 2010; Thomson, 2008). However, as with all research that aims to challenge and expand scientific knowledge by looking for the perspectives of ‘others’, that is, experience and knowledge outside the white, male, heterosexual, middle-class – and adult – position, this raises questions about the problems and possibilities of *representation* (Alanen, 1992; Hall, 1997; James, 2007). How do we represent without essentializing or ascribing some kind of authenticity beyond the social and discursive when doing research on, for example, ‘women’, ‘blacks’ or ‘children’?¹ In the case of childhood research, this question is particularly important considering the strong cultural scripts in western societies allocating innocence and authenticity to the words that children speak (James, 2007: 261). Additionally, there are often tendencies to overly stress the agency, ‘capability’ and autonomy of the child coming out of this perspective (Komoulainen, 2007). In response to this, Alanen (1992) and Mayall (2002) have argued for a standpoint theory of childhood research, moving beyond the search for an ‘authentic’ voice of children, and acknowledging the changing and different positions from which children speak. However, to fully account for the challenge of representing children’s voices in research,

a standpoint theory of childhood research also needs an awareness of the complexities *within* children's voices, as I will show in this article.

The second reason why especially drawing methods with children invite discussion of 'authentic voices' comes from the method itself. As Thomson (2008) argues, there is a direct link between the emergence of the political discourses of children's rights, the developments in new childhood research and the stress of children's 'capability' that led researchers to ask 'what methods can most adequately elicit the voices of youthful participants?' (2008: 3). Here, visual – and especially drawing – methods soon stood out as offering a different way of revealing experiences and perspectives while at the same time democratically involving children as 'producers of knowledge'. Additionally, and as argued by almost every researcher with experience of using drawing methods with children, the methods are often very successful. This is because producing or engaging with images is often part of children's everyday lives, and is experienced as 'fun', 'relaxing', 'triggering remembering', 'helping the abstract become concrete', 'minimizing the power relationship between the adult researcher and child' and so on (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010: 183; Gabb, 2010: 44; Smart, 2009: 301; see also Christensen and James, 2008b; Leitch, 2008; Mason and Tipper, forthcoming; Thomson, 2008). However, while the use of drawing methods is relatively new to social science it has a long history in therapeutic discourses and practices. And in these fields, the methods have often been seen as providing insight into the 'unconscious' of the child, and the child's drawing as offering symbols for the researcher to interpret and analyse (Leitch, 2008: 52). One of the reasons why the discussion of 'authentic voices' and drawing methods emerges is, I argue, this historical context and ideas of drawings as revealing something 'unconscious' and thus 'more authentic' about a person.²

Interestingly, the two sources of inspiration for discussions of 'authentic voices' and drawing methods – the political children's rights discourse and the therapeutic background of the methods – are, despite their close connection, quite contradictory in their view of the child. While the children's rights discourse assumes a strong agency and capability in children, inviting the children into the research process and aiming to represent the child in wider social and scientific discourses, the therapeutic paradigm assumes a privileged position for the adult researcher as 'interpreter' of the child's unconscious as it appears in the drawings. What both these positions lack are the social dimensions of 'children's voices' (Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). The idea that there are 'children's voices' out there waiting to be 'captured' by the researcher and the idea of unconscious 'voices' to uncover share an assumption of the child as having a unitary, atomistic and authentic voice. In contrast Komulainen (2007) argues, with inspiration from Bakhtin, that a 'voice' should be seen as a process rather than a location: 'Meaning comes into existence when two or more voices come into contact: there has to be a speaker and a listener, an "addresser" and "addressee", and there will also be multiple voices and "multivoicedness"' (Komulainen, 2007: 23).

Stressing the 'social voice' does not mean, however, giving up the idea of inviting voices into research. On the contrary, I wish to argue that the recent debates on 'voice' and drawing methods in childhood studies demonstrate the importance of self-critical reflection of the research process and the representations researchers – unavoidably – claim to make. In what follows, I show how an analysis of children's voices, partly

accessed through drawing methods and a *sociological* analysis of the visual data created (Smart, 2009: 302), brings important insights into a research field – in this case, the sociology of family and interpersonal relationships – insights that would otherwise have been missed.

The need for ‘children’s voices’ on care: Situating the research project

Children and care could, on the one hand, be argued to be a well-researched topic in social science. However, most research on children and care has focused on adult perceptions of care, examining the views of parents or professional caregivers in daycare or schools and research has been reluctant to document and analyse the views of children themselves on this topic. Recent developments in childhood studies have challenged this by arguing for the need to listen to and value children’s perspectives (Brannen et al., 2000; Christensen and James, 2008a; James and Prout, 1996; Mayall, 2002). Together with developments in family studies, which have encouraged an expansion of the theoretical and empirical focus beyond ‘the family’ (Mason and Tipper, forthcoming; Morgan, 1996, 2011; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Smart, 2007), this has led to a need to develop new ways of researching care and children.

This research project, entitled ‘Relations of care beyond “the family”’, sets out from the assumptions that, first, it is necessary to research care by starting in actual practices and narratives of care rather than in preconceived ideas of care as taking place in certain given relations (above all the nuclear family) and certain given places (such as the home) (Morgan, 2011). Second, by starting with children’s narratives on care, the ‘voices’ of children are invited to challenge (or confirm) the previous adult-centred theories by investigating how, in what relations and in what places children experience and narrate care in their everyday life (Brannen et al., 2000). In the project, I conducted 23 interviews with children between 5 and 12 years old, from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and from diverse housing and family situations,³ to allow for as many different narratives as possible.⁴

Capturing care: Work, emotion and relationships

Studying care of children is not an easy task, however. Care is a very contingent concept, and an often invisible and taken-for-granted activity, both to and by the giver and receiver (Brannen et al., 2000). An important distinction in studies of care, not least among feminist writers, is between ‘caring about’ and ‘caring for’ – the former referring to the love and emotion involved in caring, and the latter to the work and tasks associated with caring (Graham, 1991; Morgan, 1996: 97ff.). However, as many have argued, a dichotomous approach to care as either emotion or work is problematic. Arguing for a need to attend to the moral dimensions in care, Mason (1996) and Smart et al. (2001) focus on the centrality of care in creating and maintaining relationships. They argue that care involves aspects of negotiations, reciprocity and deservingness through which relationships – inside or outside family – are affirmed or undermined (see also Finch

and Mason, 1993). Acknowledging the relationality of care underscores, in my opinion, the importance of focusing on children as ‘active co-participants in their parent’s care’, as Brannen et al. (2000: 4) put it, and thus bringing children’s perspectives on care into research.

To capture care in children’s everyday lives, then, a methodological point of departure is needed that is open to the possibility of care taking place in different kinds of relations, situations and places. In addition, the methods should capture the different and sometimes very diffuse ingredients in the ‘care’ concept, such as care as work/practices, care as emotions and care as relationships. The methods also need to attend to the fact that care is an often taken-for-granted and invisible activity.

I wish to argue that taking different methodological points of departure – in practice by using different methodological tools during the research process – allows us to draw a more complex and multi-layered picture of children and care. Following the arguments of researchers working within the mixed-methods framework (e.g. Gabb, 2010; Mason, 2006; Smart, 2009), lived experience needs to be captured in ways that allow ‘messiness’ and multidimensionality to enter into research practice⁵ (in contrast to triangulation, which is more a way of validating data or analysis and obtaining a ‘more true’ or authentic picture of a phenomenon). Below I describe the two visual methods used in the interviews with the children in the current project, the first taking its point of departure in the ‘doing’ of care and the second in ‘relationships’ of care.

Draw-your-day: Departure in the ‘doing’

The invisibility and taken-for-granted nature of care, especially care as work, became very clear to me in my initial attempts to capture it in interviews with children. In my first interviews, I presented the child with a piece of paper asking him/her to draw ‘who takes care of you’ and ‘who you care about’. This proved quite successful in capturing relations of care, but less successful in encouraging talk about everyday practices of care. In fact, when during or after the drawing exercise I tried to talk about caring activities by asking the children about ‘their day’ or ‘who does the cooking at your house’, etc., they had a hard time focusing and remembering. Asking the child about his/her day is a common strategy in childhood research, allowing the child to start off in the ordinary and familiar (Gabb, 2010: 51). In my case, too, with my research focus, this was also a key interest in the interview. Therefore, when evaluating my method after the initial interviews, I decided to change the drawing exercise: instead of starting off on the *relations* of care surrounding the child, I began in *practices and activities* – in ‘drawing-your-day’.

The child is presented with a large piece of paper, divided into four squares. The instruction for the exercise is to ‘draw-your-day’, focusing on either a particular day or a ‘normal’ day (or both). In the first square, the child is asked to draw something that happened first thing in the morning; in the second, something that happened before lunch-time; the third square focuses on the afternoon and the last square on the evening. During the drawing exercise, I ask the child about the situation or object drawn – for example, ‘Who’s there with you?’, ‘What are you/the others doing?’, ‘Why is this particular object important?’ and so on. The conversation during the drawing exercise is recorded and

transcribed. Although all the participating children (with one exception) agreed to the basic idea of drawing their day, the way they decided to do it differed: some chose to draw mainly objects, some activities, some mostly people, and some wanted to write explanatory notes on the paper; others (as we see in the example later on) found my squares too limiting and altered the paper to better suit their narrative, e.g. by adding more lines or filling in only some of the squares.

Concentric circles of closeness: Departure in relationships

The second tool used in the interviews – concentric circles of closeness – focused on relationships. This method, which derives directly from psychological studies, has been used successfully in sociological research on personal life, e.g. on friendship (Spencer and Pahl, 2006), and in research with children (Mason and Tipper, 2008; Mason and Tipper, forthcoming; Smart et al., 2001).

My method in this project was to ask the child to draw him/herself in the inner circle, and then to draw people ‘who take care of you’, ‘who you take care of’ and ‘who are important to you’ in the surrounding circles, with those most important/those who take care of you most placed closest to the child and those less important in the outer circles.

What this method is expected to realize is an identification of, and reflection upon, relationships surrounding the child. For example, it can capture relationships of practical and emotional care that occur on a more irregular basis that would not necessarily be revealed by the draw-your-day exercise. Further, by presenting the child with both the concept of ‘taking care of’ and ‘are important’, I intentionally include the possibility that those are not necessarily one and the same person. This often encourages the child to reflect upon different kinds of relationships. It also sometimes brings the difficult aspects of lack of care to the fore, for example, when a child wants to put a certain family member in the circle ‘‘cause she’s family’, but then mentions that she does not really take care of the child at all.

The primary purpose of these exercises is not to create data in the form of drawings. These drawings give a far from ‘authentic’ image of care in the child’s everyday life; likewise, I would be strongly reluctant to analyse them as representing the child’s ‘unconsciousness’ in any way. Conversely, however, the drawings are not either merely a technique to relax the child and give him or her a sense of control over the interview (although this definitely did occur in my study).⁶ Instead, I would argue that the drawings play a significant role in helping both the child and me reveal the contours of care themselves – a concept that, as I have argued above, is quite complex. In the following, I show how the drawings, talks and encounter with Milo, one of the boys in my study, create an open platform for reflections on care, allowing for complexities, messiness, vulnerability and competence as well as unexpected relations and practices of care to emerge.

Negotiating care: The case of Milo⁷

I meet Milo, a lively and cheerful 7-year-old, in his home, a rented one-bedroom flat in a suburb of Stockholm, where he lives with his mother and younger brother William

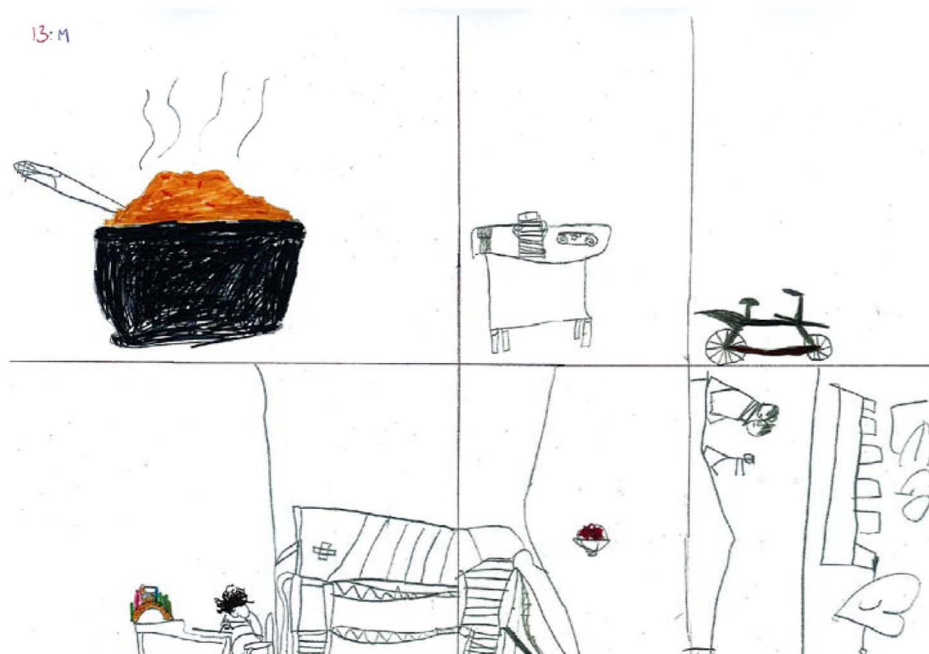


Figure 1. Milo's draw-your-day.

(1 year old). Milo shows me into the room that he shares with his brother. He is very curious and eager to get started, and we sit on the floor and begin the draw-your-day exercise (Figure 1) almost immediately.

When asked to draw his morning, Milo immediately, and with quite impressive detail, starts to describe the morning routine in the family. Soon he comes to think about the porridge he loves for breakfast, and decides to draw it. This inspires him to talk about who first taught him to make porridge – Anna – a friend of his mother's and whose son, Simon, often stays at Milo's house. These emerge as central relationships in Milo's life – both Anna as someone who provides practical care for him, and Simon whom Milo sees as part of his family, 'at least sometimes', and someone whom he, Milo, cares for (proudly). When drawing the porridge, he also makes a great deal out of telling me that he is quite capable of making his own porridge himself now.

After finishing the morning picture, Milo decides that the exercise needs to be altered. There are not enough squares, he says, 'so I'm going to divide them into two, 'cause I need more space, I really do'. In the second square, he draws the armchair in his and William's room, where his mother puts the clothes he is going to wear each day. His mother's primary responsibility for, and carrying out of, care work in his everyday life emerges several times in his story. He sees the work she does – cooking, cleaning, washing – and is very articulate and precise when describing her work and the energy it takes. To some extent, he appears to identify with the difficulty of

taking care of children. This is apparent when he talks about the mornings when Simon is staying at their flat:

Sara: So do you take care of him [Simon]?

Milo: Yep! But he can be really annoying when we're getting ready for school. Really.

Sara: Mm, OK, what does he do then?

Milo: (*Lowering his voice, giving it a dramatic touch*) He refuses to get dressed.

Sara: Oh really?

Milo: (*Still in a dramatic voice*) He refuses to get off the bed when mum is putting on his socks. He did that once. Then, when we're outside, he refuses to walk! And that makes us late. Makes me late.

While formulating the difficulty in taking care of children, he also communicates a strong sense that adults have the responsibility of taking care of children. This is expressed in the complex ways that he talks about his mother. Milo tells me early on in the interview that his mother is often angry and sad. He also offers explanations for her anger and sadness. He starts to talk about the frequent fights with Luka, the father of his brother, William. Until recently, Luka lived with the family but has now moved out. But soon he turns to another possible reason for his mother's sadness and anger: her childhood.

Milo: (*In a small voice*) But mum is also angry 'cause when she was a child, her mother didn't comfort her, she wasn't allowed to be sad and . . . (*coughs and clears his throat several times*) . . . she thought that her mum should take care of her, she wanted that, so . . . (*coughs again*) . . .

Sara: When she was a child?

Milo: Mm. So, yes, then she has to get the sadness out when she's an adult.

Sara: Mum? Yes . . .

Milo: . . . but I actually think she should have done that before me and William were born.

Sara: Yes . . .

Milo: [About the drawing] Look at my mudflap, it's really annoying . . .

On the one hand, then, Milo shows great understanding for how difficult things are for his mother. The quite advanced account he gives of his mother's childhood as an explanation for her sadness is, one would assume, probably provided by the mother (or some other adult). However, at the same time he sees that his mother's sadness is affecting him and his brother negatively and to some extent wants to hold his mother responsible for this by suggesting that it is not fair, that she should have dealt with it before he and his brother were born. He returns to this position later on, towards the end of the interview, declaring in very strong terms that 'grown-ups should be able to take care of children' by 'helping them when they are sad, and giving them proper food', 'not yelling at them, 'cause then they can get really, really sad, and I'm sad'.

Milo's everyday caring situation is also present in an indirect way in how he continues the drawing exercise. Although I am visiting him on a school holiday, Milo chooses to

draw an ordinary school day. Pictures 3 to 8 all show objects and situations connected with school: his bike on the way to school; Milo working in the classroom; recess and playground; eating lunch at school; recess and playground again. School is important to him, almost like a safe haven where he can escape 'when mum's been angry in the morning', as he says. At school, there are adults to talk to although he would like there to be more adults and he expresses a wish to incorporate the relationship with his mother into the (safe) school setting by suggesting that she could maybe start working at his school, so she would be there for him to talk to if he gets sad.

When turning to the concentric circles, Milo starts by drawing himself (Figure 2). The next person he draws is his brother William: 'He's the most important!' he exclaims. William also appeared repeatedly in Milo's draw-your-day exercise, not only as someone Milo takes care of, but also as someone who – despite his young age – takes care of Milo. Milo and William sleep in the same bed, although there is another bed available; and being afraid of the dark, Milo thinks it's 'great that I can be with William'.

After drawing William, he draws his mother, who he says is the one who takes care of him most. Then he needs to stop and think for a while:

Sara: So . . . who else takes care of you?

Milo: Wait . . . Luka.

Sara: Luka, yes . . .

Milo: He's here (*points at the third circle*). He's not that important. Or, yes, I like him, but he doesn't take care of me that much. 'Cause I'm not at his place that often.

Luka, the birthfather of his brother William, is often referred to by Milo as 'dad', although he is well aware that they do not have any genetic bond. The next person to appear in the circles is indeed Milo's birthfather. This is the first time that he is mentioned in the interview, and Milo clearly express dissatisfaction with the fact that he hardly sees his father and puts him in the outer circle.

When towards the end of our talk I introduce the concept of 'family' and ask him to reflect upon who is in his family, he starts by mentioning his mother and William, and then his 'two dads', 'one dad who lives somewhere else, and another dad'. But he is a bit concerned about William having another father than himself, 'that makes William my half brother', he says, 'but since he is living here I count him as my real brother'.⁸ Thus, the importance of William is expressed again, and despite acknowledging that he knows that it is technically wrong to call William his 'real' brother, he insists on doing so and offers arguments why he thinks he has the right to.

Milo carefully discusses and evaluates his relationships with different persons when doing the closeness circle exercise. As Mason and Tipper (2008) found in their study on children and kinship, there is a lot of negotiation in who is deemed close or distant. Closeness is not necessarily granted just because a person plays an important role in everyday caring activities. Anna, who in the draw-your-day exercise emerged as someone doing care work, is not included in the circle, but her son Simon is included (and is granted the status of being in Milo's family, at least 'sometimes'). Further, closeness is



Närhetscirklar

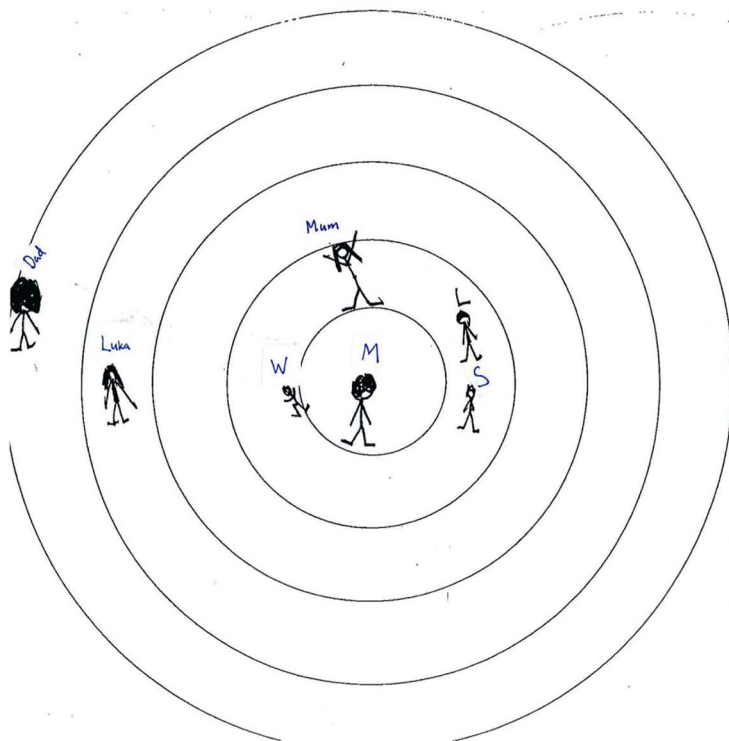


Figure 2. Milo's circles of closeness.

not granted based on genetic bonds, as is apparent in Milo's decision to place his birthfather in the outer circle. However, genetic bonds are still something that Milo has to consider and negotiate, apparent in the fact that he cannot (and does not wish to) exclude his birthfather despite his invisibility in Milo's everyday life, as well as in his need to legitimate the use of the word 'brother' for William.

A multidimensional voice

In analysing the data arising from the encounter with Milo it becomes apparent that the 'voice' of children – even the 'voice' of one child as in this case – is far from singular and unitary. And importantly, the methodological tools used enable the 'multivoicedness' and complexity to arise (Komulainen, 2007: 23; cf. Spyrou, 2011: 158ff.).

In Milo's narrative, the two methods help Milo narrate *when care as work and care as emotion coincide*, as well as when they do not. Milo's mother, for example, is providing both emotional and practical care, but the caring relationship with her is at the same time very complex and Milo is doing a lot of work trying to narrate his experiences and feelings for his mother (seeing her as the most important, wanting a closer relationship with her through school, identifying with how hard it can be to take care of children, while at the same time expressing dissatisfaction with the fact that her sadness affects the care for him and his brother). The complexity is also visible in narratives when *care and emotion do not coincide* (as with Anna), and in the negotiations and dealings of *who is close, who is important* and who one wishes were closer (as with Luka and the birthfather). Importantly, some – from a 'traditional' sociology of the family perspective – *unexpected relations of care* emerge through the use of the two methods, such as the relationship between Milo and his toddler brother, where the draw-your-day exercise tells about the importance of William in the everyday care of, and by, Milo, while the concentric circles invite Milo to reflect upon the relationship. Milo's narrative is also challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about age: it is not only that he is giving care to his toddler brother, he also stresses the reciprocity in the relationship and thereby challenges the idea of care as something adults or older children 'do' to younger ones. Simultaneously, the development of a *caring self* is important in Milo's narrative, appearing in his presentation of himself as capable of doing care work, both for himself – the porridge – and for his brother and friend Simon.

The drawings are part of the whole picture and cannot be separated from the talk, or the entire encounter, between the researcher and the child. This, I argue, is the necessary point of departure for a sociological analysis of drawings, always taking into account that meaning is not fixed, and that interpretation – as interpretation of words expressed in an interview – needs to be seen as suggestive and be contextualized thoroughly (Smart, 2009: 303). Seen in context, I would like to suggest that Milo's draw-your-day drawing not only helps him and me organize and 'narrativize' his everyday life and everyday caring situation, but is also itself part of his narrative of his caring situation. His choice to draw a school day despite the fact that I am visiting him on a school holiday strengthens his talk about school as an important place for him and a place where he expects and (sometimes) receives care. In addition, his decision to divide the paper into more squares can, in a way, be seen in the light of his talk about a wish for more and closer relationships with adults. Although Milo shows over and over again that he feels uncomfortable talking about care – for example visible in the quote above, where he quickly turned to commenting on the drawing when talking about his mother's childhood – it seems that he wants to extend the exercise by adding more lines and drawing more pictures. I soon begin to realize that he is not necessarily enjoying the exercise, rather he wants me to stay.⁹ I interpret this as a way for him to test me as a potential important relationship in his life. This, I argue, is an interpretation made taking the context of the whole research situation into account: the drawings, the talks and the specific meeting between Milo and me.

Thus, the narratives of care emerging in the project do not simply emanate in some kind of 'natural' way from the child to the researcher. On the contrary, given the

character of 'care' as an often invisible set of practices and emotions, I as researcher am very much involved in constructing the narrative, together with the child. The methods reveal neither the 'authentic' voice of the agentic child nor the 'authentic' unconscious voice of the child. Rather, it is by their use that the multidimensionality of the child's narrative can emerge. Through the draw-your-day exercise, a platform is created where the mundane comes into focus and thereby becomes visible and important: the hanging of clothes on a chair, the making of porridge, the trip to school, etc. And through this, the people around the child who do the care work emerge, as well as the child as a 'care worker' him- or herself. Further, the emotions and relationships growing within and through that work can be reflected upon, as well as the different places where care as work and care as emotion are taking place. The closeness circle encourages a more in-depth focus on relationships, inviting reflection and negotiations of who is caring for and who is important to the child. In addition, both methods allow an open approach to what relationships, what circumstances and what physical places care take place in, thus allowing for the unexpected – such as the care provided by a toddler brother – to emerge.

In the narrative that emerges through the platform created by the drawing methods, Milo comes through as simultaneously competent and vulnerable. He is creatively dealing with and negotiating discourse (on good care, on children's right to care, on 'family' and brotherhood), collective/family narratives and memories (e.g. the narrative of the reason behind his mother's sadness, or the hardship involved in taking care of children), wishes and longings (e.g. for a closer relationship not only with his birthfather but also with his mother, and in a way with me), and incorporates these into his experiences in his everyday world (see Mason, 2006; Smart, 2007). However, being competent in negotiating discourses and creating meaningful narratives out of experiences is not the same as being independent or autonomous (Mason and Tipper, 2008). On the contrary, Milo has limited room for manoeuvre: limited most obviously by his mother, who is crucial in inviting and legitimizing other adults as potential carers in Milo's life (e.g. Luka, Anna, teachers at school), some of whom he affirms and renders 'important' while others seem to play more a practical than emotional role in his life.

In his narrative, Milo's voice is neither singular nor simple. However, this 'messiness' is not, I argue, a sign of him 'contradicting himself' or being unable to reveal the 'real' contours of care in his life. On the contrary, the messiness *is* his voice on care, revealing the inevitable complexity of the practices and relationships as such. Milo and the other children in the study definitely have something to say about care, something that brings new insights and challenges to the sociology of family. These children's voices have drawn attention to practices and relationships of care, as well as situations and places where care happens, and shared their reflections upon what care *is* – all of which would not have been made visible had their voices not been invited into the research process.

Conclusion: Inviting new – 'messy' – voices

The discussion of 'voices' in childhood research is as necessary and important as the previous (and still ongoing) discussions in other research fields sharing the will to challenge science with the voices of previously unheard people. This also necessitates a discussion of the process through which 'voice' is produced in research.

The voices of children that emerge in my research project are very much dependent on the drawing methods I have chosen (and partly developed) for this specific encounter. And as all research data – numbers and words being those we are more used to working with – drawing methods have to be evaluated in relation to concerns about ‘selection, processing, editing and representation’, as ‘all languages are equally tricksters’ (Thomson, 2008: 11). I have argued for a sociological analysis of drawing data, always acknowledging the contingency of meaning and the contextualization of interpretations (Smart, 2009). Just like an interview, drawing data and the accounts contextualizing them need to be interpreted taking into account the specific social encounter in which they are produced.

I am not arguing, however, that drawing methods are always the best way of doing research with children. What methodological tools are appropriate depends – as always – on the research question in focus. However, as many studies have shown, visual, and especially drawing, methods are often appreciated by children, and in addition, as I have shown in this article, especially useful when investigating contingent and ‘taken-for-granted’ practices and relationships, such as care.

Using drawing methods – and especially within a mixed-methods framework – is also effective for inviting the ‘messiness’ of children’s voices, a messiness that I argue is necessary for a standpoint theory in childhood research (Alanen, 1992; James, 2007) that allows children to be represented not only as ‘having differences’, e.g. depending on class and gender, but also as being complex subjects within one and the same ‘voice’. This is what enables a move beyond both the simplified view of the child as either a ‘rational autonomous “agent” ’ (Komulainen, 2007: 25) or a representative of an ‘unconscious authentic’ voice. Through inviting and allowing the messy, children become the social actors that new childhood research strived to represent (James, 2007) – simultaneously competent, agentic, vulnerable and dependent. And as such, children’s voices can challenge what is known. Science still and always will need the voices of people – small and large – who have been previously unheard. Not to represent something ‘authentic’, but to challenge the scientific imagination.

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Notes

1. See e.g. Acker et al. (1991) and Hartsock (1983). For my position on this, see Eldén (2005).
2. For attempts to incorporate psychoanalytic analysis into social science, see e.g. Holloway and Jefferson (2000) and Roseneil (2009).

3. With heterosexual and homosexual parents living together, separated or single parents, children living in co-housing, etc.
4. Information about the project was posted on several websites and contact made with various parents' organizations, such as associations for single parents and LGBT-parent networks. Three different schools in a larger city were also contacted and distributed information about the project. However, most of the informants were accessed through snowballing. Access to and informed consent to interview the children came through parents, but consent from the children was absolutely crucial in the study: I asked for their informed consent before and during the interview and was also attentive throughout the interviews for other signs of them wanting to end it.
5. Mixing methods is indeed common in research with children, e.g. Brannen et al. (2000), Christensen and James (2008b), Gabb (2010), Mason and Tipper (2008) and Smart et al. (2001).
6. A positive consequence that is worth noting is the slowness that the drawing activity brings to the interview encounter. Drawing takes time (for most children) and this seems to also give more time for reflection on the daily activities and relationships.
7. All the names and some of the circumstances of the child have been changed to avoid identification. All the quotes have been translated from Swedish by the author. The choice to present Milo is not motivated by him being 'typical' of the children participating in the study. Rather, since the primary aim of this article is to discuss method, Milo is chosen as an example of how the research methods 'work' in allowing for complex voices to emerge. In that sense, Milo is representative for most of the participating children. For more of the substantial findings of the study, see Eldén (forthcoming).
8. The Swedish expression used by Milo was 'whole brother', in contrast to half-brother, meaning that you share both parents.
9. Halfway through the interview, he starts to ask me what we should do afterwards, and after a particularly difficult passage in our talk, he asks whether we 'can't do something more fun now'. I subsequently decide to end the interview, and we start playing instead. In addition, both during and after the interview, he asks when we will meet again and seems disappointed when I do not give a definite answer.

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