Children's Perspectives through the Camera Lens

*Reflections on Meaning-making
Processes and Participatory Research*

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Abstract

In relation to any claims about "child-centred" research, the present article stresses the need to reflect on what is actually at stake in terms of participation and the meaning-making processes that evolve in a certain research setting. Our experiences with photo-taking methods are based on two separate studies involving children (age 5-8 years) and young adolescents (age 12-16 year). Taking a constructivist approach, the article draws special attention to issues related to the age of the children, the type of camera used, the researcher's status in the fieldwork and the type of data acquired through these children's photos. The article stresses the need to perceive the story behind the photo as an outcome of how the child chose to position him/herself within a certain research context, which in turn affects how the child sees, thinks and acts, but also what he/she sees.

Keywords: children's perspectives, constructive approach, photo-taking methods, participation and meaning-making

Introduction: The Children's Perspective Claim

Today the claim of having taken a children's perspective is often made in academic research and this goes hand in hand with thoughts about a participating and competent child (Sjöberg 2010b). A children's perspective has become a buzz-word in research, one that should be much more carefully used among scholars by providing a clear definition of what is actually meant by the term in a given context. Stating that a children's perspective has been applied by interviewing children is far from adequate. Although many studies on 'participatory research methods' claim that additional methods (such as drawings, storytelling, community-based video making etc.) can elicit participants' views, we still need to consider, in any claims about "child-centred" research, what is actually at stake in terms of participation and the meaning-making processes that evolve in a certain research setting. In the present article, we are particularly interested in the question 'What does it mean to apply a children's perspective through a camera?' we aim to answer this question by reflecting on the photographic methods used in research with children and young people based on our experiences from two separate studies.

As a counterargument to the claim of treating photographs as objective evidence, we stress the need to look at the research context in which the photographs are taken, which in turn has implications for the meanings that evolve and are attached to, for example, the photos taken and the type of participation the young photo-takers are involved in.

The benefits of comparing our experiences from two studies are that these discussions can be seen as a reflexive technique, making us attentive to both similar and different participatory relations in two research settings and providing us with additional knowledge about photographic methods. In the present article, we draw special attention to issues related to the age of the children, the type of camera used, the researcher's status in the fieldwork and the type of data acquired through these children's photos. As for the latter, the construction of meaning, combined with interviews and play, is stressed which in turn has implications for the claim of having taken the children' perspective in the process of analysis.

Utilizing photographs in social research requires a theory of how photos are used and interpreted by the photo-taker and the researcher (Schwartz 1989). Our critical reflections on our research with children take their theoretical point of departure from a constructivist approach (Greig and Taylor 1999: 37):

> Constructivist researchers perceive the child as a subjective, contextual, self-determining and dynamic being. Children and their caretakers are social, relational beings who are engaged in joint action. As they interact they construct joint meanings within a given context. In this way, meaning is constructed symbolically in interaction with others. […] They are both the observed and the observer […] the meanings constructed and actions taking place in everyday situations are also located within specific cultural and historical practices and time.

A crucial question to ask when raising the issues above is whether it is possible at all to gain an inside perspective and grasp children's worlds through their eyes. Is it not the case that every research situation is always embedded in, for instance, various power relations, where it is the researcher who sets the conditions of the research and formulates the research questions? And it can be questioned if the power issue even more evident when dealing with children (Eder and Fingerson 2002; Sjöberg 2010b). If we admit that various relations and contexts affect research, what then does a children's perspective mean in terms of meaning-making processes and participation?

Visual Methods + Participatory Research = Children's Views?

Visual methods (such as drawings, video productions and photos) are used in research for various aims, such as understanding the field as a way of making field notes, for the participants to reflect on their everyday lives or understand themselves, or as a device for talking to participants (see further Rasmussen and Smidt 2002; Gauntlett 2007; Moser and Hermann 2008). The emphasis on perceiving children and youth as co-researchers rather than as study objects can be seen as an outcome of more general changes that have taken place within childhood research, where children's rights and competences are stressed (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). Thus, many voices are raised concerning how visual means may offer alternative ways of exploring a person's relationship with his/her

media culture (Gauntlett 2005). Pink agrees "Therefore by paying attention to images in ethnographic research and representation it is possible that new ways of understanding individuals, cultures and research materials may emerge" (Pink 2001:13). Although there are an increasing number of studies using visual methods with children, not many articles or books reflect on the various types of participation and meaning-making processes that may take place in research. Buckingham (2009), for example, raises the question of participation using creative methods (suggested by Gauntlett 2007) and its validity of the outcomes, if children are forced to perform a task for a certain project. Some children may not feel comfortable using cameras, or may prefer expressing themselves using alternative methods, such as drawing, making stories, or music.

In the discussion on children, as co-researchers Mitchell and Reid-Walsh state, "Thus, if children's popular culture offers itself as a rich ethnographic site for visual documentation, it is children themselves who might be regarded as obvious ethnographers in its documentation" (2002: 90). Especially with younger children, it is frequently argued that interview methods may not be enough to understand their media usage in everyday life (e.g. to be able to comprehend the questions posed by the researcher or depending on the individual's personality) (Greig and Taylor 1999; Fine and Sandstrom 1988). Such statements need to be critically examined and are rooted in thinking based on dichotomies rather than in non-dualistic ideas. Consequently, those reading the studies tend to have the impression that visual methods can solve many of the problems not addressed by traditional interview methods. Is this really the case? Photos, for example, like any other material collected by researchers, may often not to be treated as actual social representations of the child's life, but rather seen as his/her perceived reality. They are "[…] physical manifestations of a child's way of looking at and experiencing the world. This can lead to certain questions: how the photographs were produced and how these photographs were treated and talked about by the child" (Cavin 1994: 2). Secondulfo (1997:33) contends that, in the study of material culture, visual methods "[…] are particularly useful, sometimes essential, in gathering data about social and symbolic uses of goods and objects in day-to-day social life" (1997: 33). Once again, we see examples of how visual methods are perceived as a kind of magical key to enter the lives of young people without any critical reflections.

Studies involving children and making use of recent digital technologies are usually labelled as a kind of participatory research (c.f. Gauntlett 2007; Bromely 2004; de Block and Buckingham 2007; Drew *et al.* 2010). Thus, they do not just analyse the photographs taken, but also the photo-takers' behaviours, such as interaction among peers, attitudes towards technology, or discussions about the photographs (see e.g. Van Dijck 2008). Here, we can also find the term participatory to be problematic when it is used in a context without clarifying its meaning and often implying that any kind of traditional interview method or observation is primarily passive. The problem is that these types of studies appear to over-emphasize digital techniques as participatory in nature, and tend to neglect, for example, the variation in young individuals' media experiences and skills in using digital media. Furthermore the assumption that children and young people are "digital natives" (Prensky 2001) can be pointed out in regard to the selection of the medium. However, as Selwyn argues (2009), we should not make such an assumption.

Fieldwork Settings: A Brief Note

In our two studies, we have examined children's identities and the roles of media in diasporas, using interview, observation and photographic methods. The Japanese study is based on Kondo's PhD thesis (2005), and the Swedish case is from the project 'Mediated childhoods in multicultural families in Greece' (Sjöberg 2006; 2010a). Both projects examined how families situated between different cultures make use of and negotiate between various media in daily life as well as their experience of a multicultural way of living. To look at these issues, both studies applied similar methods (in-depth interviews, observations, field notes, and photo taking). The UK project was carried out over 12 months between 2002 and 2003. Eleven Japanese families who had children between five and eight years and who found themselves in London were visited. These middle-class Japanese families were living temporary in London because they had been sent there by their companies (usually for five years). The mothers and children including their siblings (11 mothers and 23 children) were observed and interviewed every two months for a year. The data collection for the Greek project took place during September 2004, and ten families participated; all families were living in Athens and its surroundings and had children aged between 12 and 16 years (12 children in total). In each family, the Swedish wives had lived in Greece from 10 to 26 years. The husbands were all Greek, except for one family, where the father was non-European. The majority of the parents had middle-class backgrounds and worked as teachers, secretaries, physiotherapists, painters, psychologists, or owned a café, hotel, or retail outlets.

Issues in Participatory Methods with Children

We will start by discussing how the participants' age affected the use of photos, and their participation, in our two studies and the possibility of gaining a children's perspective. This issue is crucial not only in terms of the capacity for children to express themselves through the use of a camera, but also the need for researchers to understand children's cognitive, linguistic and social skills at various ages (Ochs 1999). The participants from our studies were from different age groups. The Japanese children were between 5 and 8 years, while the Swedish children were between 12 and 16. All young participants in the two studies were asked to take photos of things, places and people that were important to them. But while the Japanese children could use the researcher's digital camera, the Swedish youngsters were sent, prior to the researcher's visit, a disposable camera with which to take photos of their everyday lives. Concerning the type of participation in the fieldwork, the young children might have felt a bit nervous about using someone else's digital camera. In fact, all the mothers told the children to be careful with the camera and not to break it. It could be claimed that using their own camera, like in the disposable camera method, would have given the Japanese participants more freedom in terms of how they took photographs. Thus, the children's age and the different approaches to camera choice turned out to be rather crucial to the presence of the researcher in the photo-taking process. Both the children's mobility and their ability to decide for themselves where to go with the camera, for instance, gave shape to a certain context of participation. In addition, both studies had chosen the private sphere 'the home' as their main research setting, the belief being that the home environment would provide more freedom and a more relaxed atmosphere. In the Japanese study, however, we could

ask whether the mothers may have interfered with the younger children's photo-taking (in addition to the researcher's influence). The first few shots tended to be monitored by the mothers to see how their children did the work, but the rest of the photographs were left to the children alone.

Compared to disposable cameras, which are prone to mechanical malfunction; digital cameras are prone to even more technical errors (e.g. battery drainage, or potential errors in transferring images onto desktops or laptops). Fortunately, there were no such errors in this study. The only problem occurred when one memory card was filled when one boy attempted to photograph his entire collection of *Pokemon* cards and *Bayblade*'s toys. Of course, even the disposable camera had its limits. Having certain limitations may have made the Swedish-Greek youngsters think more carefully about what they should really take photos of. On the other hand, the children in London were too young to think of the problem and enthusiastically took photos, as many as they could, with the digital camera. The boy's act mentioned above can be analysed that one interpretation of the actions of the boy who took pictures of his own thing is that his attachment to his collection of these particular items was part of his conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1994), as he was very proud of his collection, which he displayed by showing the items off to the researcher and his peers. Noticeably, his collection of cards and toys were originally purchased in Japan, as all the cards were written in Japanese (not the American version). The boy said "I want to take one by one because each one is important to me". The photo-taking method added to how much the child felt about his collection, not just based on his words, but also on the more than 30 photos of his cards and spinning toys.

Sarah Drew and her colleagues (2010), who endeavoured to use a digital photo-taking method with 10 to 18 year olds, stated that they had participants who did not want to take photographs of their everyday lives, even though the researchers kept reminding them to do so. How much should a researcher actually remind the child? Can children be willing to participate in the research without feeling 'forced' to do the task? Although the informants in the Greek project did not meet the researcher in advance, they knew that the she was Swedish, their mother was, and they seemed to trust the researcher based on her ethnicity and interest in their views. The assignment became a way of expressing their differences compared to other Greek peers. At the same time, it would be a threat to the claim of having a children's perspective if we did not accept that the photos were taken in this specific research setting (e.g. the researcher being Swedish). The setting may have caused the young informants to position themselves in a particular way when taking the photos, but also in their discussion about the photos and the specific meanings attached to them. We will return to this issue later on. The researcher's status in the field cannot be ignored. Critics question the researcher's status in diasporic studies, i.e. when he/she studies culture other than his/her own (Papadopoulos and Lees 2002). However, both our studies in Greece and the UK were carried out by the researchers with the same origins as the participants (Swedish and Japanese), and both researchers had also spent considerable time in the "new country" before the studies were conducted. Thus, having certain national and cultural knowledge in common made not only the relationship between the researchers and the participating families easier and more comfortable, but it also facilitated discussions on the similarities and differences between, for example, cultures and countries' media landscapes.

Furthermore, "space" became a relevant issue in terms of the participants' mobility in both studies. A study conducted in the UK by Thomas and Thompson (2004) found that children under 11 have very limited space where children have to be supervised by their guardians (they cannot be alone if they are under 11 years old). The study shows that children in the UK feel safer at home. In this sense, the young Japanese children who took photos of objects at home (including the garden) in the U.K study may reflect the space where they actually spent most of their time in London. It could be also argued that using the researcher's digital camera led to the limited space (and participation), as compared to the disposable camera method used in the Greek project. In a study by Sharples and his colleagues (2003), however, the photos of younger children (7-11) were mostly taken at home. The results show that even when using disposable cameras, young children under 11 in the U.K. had limited space. Needless to say, the teenagers in Greece, who could go out more freely and independently, also showed their movement between various public and private spaces in their everyday lives. Thus, we have to consider the limitation of "space"; where young participants take photos depends on their age, but also on the perceived risks of various public spaces for children.

The Camera within Interviews and Play

Reflecting on our relationships with the young participants, one of the differences in our two studies was how the photo-taking methods were used. The Swedish youngsters took photos with a disposable camera that had been sent by post before meeting the researcher. The main purpose of the photos in the Greek project was to serve as an "ice-breaker", as a way of establishing a rapport with the young informants (c.f. Pink 2001). The photo-taking method used with the Japanese children, on the other hand, emerged more "spontaneously". While the researcher was taking photos with her digital camera instead of taking notes, as she had visited them a few times, the children started directing what pictures she should take. In addition, by visiting the families every two months over a year, the status of the researcher became blurred: the children started seeing her as a friend and she was invited in, for example, to the children's play (see further Kondo 2008).

In both cases, the photographs taken became a useful device for finding out what the young participants wanted to focus on and discuss further with the researcher. In the Swedish case, the researcher encouraged the Swedish-Greek youngsters to take the opportunity to get involved in the research process by shaping the agenda of the interview which was taken place later (c.f. Harper 1998; Gauntlett 2005). While Morrow and Richards (1996) state that the power of the adult researcher may be reduced by applying techniques that make children feel like part of the research process (here taking their own photos and setting the agenda for the interview about these photos), we again need to take into account various factors in the research context that may have influenced the type of photos taken and what the young adolescents chose to talk about during the interview. For example, would their type of participation in the study have been different with a Greek/British researcher? Even if the photos encouraged the child to steer the interview, it is important to remember that an interview never involves two equal persons, as it is the interviewer who defines and controls the situation (Kvale 1996). In the Greek study, for instance, there were cases when the young participants had taken

photos of their house and school because they thought it would be interesting for the researcher to see these places.

Comparing the Greek case, the participants in London were too young to be interviewed for an extended period of time. Visiting them every two months over a year helped to establish trust between the researcher and the participants and gave the researcher the opportunity to play with the children rather than interviewing them. In the process of spending an extended period of time with the young participants, children's views can be seen through various forms of expression, such as playing with dolls or Lego bricks, playing the piano, drawing pictures or making up stories.

Compared to the Swedish-Greek youth, the researcher in the UK case was conducting participant observation with them initially, and mainly interviewed their mothers due to the children's young age. Most of the time they tended to show their favourite toys, drawings, their treasure boxes, collections of stickers, spinning toys*, Pokemon* cards, their schoolwork and awards from school etc. The researcher always had a digital camera with her when she visited the families. She took photos of the children's drawings or collections of videos, books and toys. Initially, the researcher initiated/directed the field, choosing what she wanted to record in the camera. However, with time, the children began telling the researcher what they wanted her to take photos of, for example, things they were proud of (new toys from Japan, a new Disney princess dress and other accessories). Thus, the photo-taking method became a method guided by the participants; it emerged from the field. The photo-taking became a fun activity for the participants in a format they knew well-playing; they did not merely have to answer questions.

Constructing Meanings through Talks

We agree with Pink (2001) that visual images are filled with ambiguity, and it is only by letting the children talk about their photos that the subjective meanings attached to the photos are brought to the fore. A critical stand is necessary when using photos in research, making it necessary to combine this visual means of expression with other materials. In both studies, the photos taken by the young participants have been interpreted from the perspective of the image-maker rather than from a specific theoretical textual perspective. The youngsters were asked to talk about their photos, which stressed a relational type of interpretation, resulting from an interaction between the child and the researcher within a research context. The need to grasp the interplay between a taken photo and the story behind it is also stressed by Rasmussen (2004). That is, the subjective meaning of a photo is to be studied, which places the photo in a specific context. Furthermore, the verbal story attached to the photo is part of the meaning- making process. A specific content, its meaning, is constructed and re-constructed through story-telling (Änggård 2006).

For example, the following two photos were discussed in the Greek study and raised issues related to culture, identity and media use. All of these are complex issues that might be difficult to ask about in an interview situation. But using the young informants' photos, these issues were grasped and discussed on the image-maker's own initiative, but still in a specific research setting.

Figure 1. *A 16-year-old Boy's Photo*

Figure one illustrates a photo taken by a 16-year-old boy in the Greek project. The boy explained to the researcher the reason for taking the photo:

> – Yeah, and this photo shows the Greek flag, it's important that I live here, I think. Perhaps not everyday, it has been a big thing to just live here… more lively, more people. The temperament is more fun than there in Sweden but I haven't lived there. [...]. This should have been a better picture, but you can like see the sun and the Greek flag so it was the Greek sun...[the flag], and like together 'cause'– the sun is also important. People enjoy the sun. You're not happy that you have, but it makes you happy when there' is a little bit of sun, not always dark and such.

The Greek flag and the sun became the signifier (Saussure 1983) of nationality and the importance of locality. It is based on both the place he lives, an aspect that was mentioned frequently by the young informants in the photos taken as well as in the interviews, and the personality of Greeks with which he identifies himself. It is interesting to note how comparisons are being made about "there in Sweden", showing how the boy positions himself in relation to the researcher. Other photos that led to discussions about Greece and Sweden and cultural identity were those of the Greek sea, the map of Sweden on the wall, friends, family members both in Greece and Sweden, a church (discussing one's religious beliefs), a café (the lifestyle of having a coffee or frappé in the Greek culture), and ancient buildings (the importance of knowing Greek history).

The second photo (see Figure 2) was taken by a 14-year-old girl who was very fond of *Harry Potter*; exemplifying the global feature of the contemporary media landscape (Nielsen Media Research, 2007). The girl confessed, "I love to read; dreaming away to another world". With these words she explained not only why she had taken a photo of her favourite *Harry Potter* books*,* but also of *Avalon* by M. Bradley. Based on this photo, the researcher and the girl talked about various issues related specifically to *Harry Potter* (reading books, watching the films and participating in forums on the Internet to discuss *Harry Potter* with other fans), and also about reading in general, reading in Swedish and Greek and comparing Greek and Swedish children's books. While discussing the photo, the girl also talked about how she, influenced by reading *Harry Potter,* had started to enjoy reading other fantasy books and that she had begun to write her own fantasy stories, which in turn were published on the Internet. Once again we see how one specific photo raised several issues during the interview. Another observation is the effort the girl has put into arranging the books in order. While the girl did not mind mixing the books about *Harry Potter* in Swedish and Greek, she categorized the books based on the content: *Harry Potter* and *Avalon.* The photo is also an example of how the photo is constructed in a certain context with the aim of being presented to another person.

Figure 2. *A 14-year-old Girl's Favourite Books: Harry Potter and Avalon (in Swedish and Greek)*

Looking at how photo-taking can give the researcher an insight into complex issues related to culture and identity, we will consider a 6-year-old girl's photos from the U.K. study. Once again showing how children used the photos as a means to categorize objects. The girl had a collection of accessories and she did not want to take everything in one photo, saying: "No, these are from Japan, these are from my friends in London", '*Pokemon*'s books must be taken altogether, not with other English books' (Figure 3). Again, here, the girl initiated the layout of the objects in the photo, choosing the particular objects. It became very clear that the girl had her own categories and was aware of being particular about her toys. Observing how the children took photos of important objects in their lives, revealed that all these objects had special meanings to the children. These items provided insightful information to the researcher in the process of analysing identity formation and the roles of the media. The children tended to switch their codes; if they played with their non-Japanese peers, they played football in their garden, or board games. However, when they played with Japanese peers, it was with the Japanese toys or they played Japanese 'Super Heroes'. Thus, they did not mix Japanese and non-Japanese, which was also shown in the photos taken by the children.

The 6-year-old girl, whose photo is shown in Figure 3, had memories of each object such as the fancy hair pins from London, which were a gift from her English friend, and the ones from Japan, which were sent by her grandfather. Both were important to her.

Figure 3. *Left: Pokemon Books, Middle: Fancy Hair Pins from London. Right: Fancy Hair Pins from Japan*
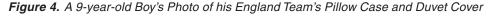

Thus, although the children in the U.K. study were too young to talk specifically about identities and belonging, some symbolical forms in the photographs taken by the children led the researcher to realize that they had already developed the idea that their lives are in two countries.

One of the advantages of using the camera with the younger children in the U.K. study was that the photos sometimes showed different things than what their mothers believed the children might like. The mothers who believed they knew everything about their children also had power in the field in relation to the answers. However, taking photos enabled the children to take the initiative. For example, a mother believed that her 6-year-old boy was no longer interested in making his Lego's car. But he took a picture of it. He was proud of showing off his self-made gigantic car, saying he was very proud of making a Lego's car.

Like "space", the timing of the fieldwork can influence how the participants respond. For example, during the fieldwork for the UK project, the World Cup 2002 in Korea and Japan was held. The children and husbands participated in watching the World Cup not

only in their homes, but also in their schools and offices, as they were aired early in the mornings only when the English team played. The mothers in the study were surprised at how people in U.K. support the world event, and compared the situation to Japan, where people separate work/study and leisure (and are not allowed to watch games at school or work). Consequently, the children in the study talked about the World Cup. Many children learned different national flags at school during the event and became more aware of "nationality". In addition, although the world event is temporal, one can develop a discussion on the past, present, and future by taking a photo of an object.

Figure 4. A 9-year-old Boy's Photo of his England Team's Pillow Case and Duvet Cover

The photo above (Figure 4) was taken by a 9-year-old boy (when he took this photo, he became 9 years old) who went to an English private boy's school where they actively played sports. The boy who took the picture told the researcher that he was supporting England in the World Cup as other peers in his school did, which he was proud of. Interestingly, the mother saw this photo and became embarrassed, saying, "Oh no, this is terrible because it shows how untidy our house is". However, the untidy bedroom was not in the boy's perspective; all he wanted to show was the English team's flag. Similar to the photo of the Greek flag above, the flag signified nationality and local culture. The boy told the researcher that he must be good at playing football in England, but he also wanted to be good at playing baseball in the future, considering his return to Japan, where baseball is popular. He felt that he must be good at baseball in order to be accepted at a school in Japan in the future, as he was accepted at his private school

by British peers for his football and rugby skills. Such a conception cannot be ignored in the process of developing identities and a sense of belonging (cf. Cronin and Mayall 1998, Hall 2001). In this sense, this 9-year-old boy explained how he wanted to be in England now and in Japan in the future. Thus, the photos taken by the boy moved beyond present time, encompassing both the past and future.

Conclusions: Looking Beyond the Visual

In the beginning of the article, the question 'What does it mean to apply a children's perspective through a camera?' was raised. We have looked at this issue more closely throughout the text by reflecting on the photographic methods used in our research with children and young people. An important theoretical point of departure for both studies has been their constructivist perception of the young participants and the collected material. Thus, the relational and contextual nature of different meaning-making processes and participation is brought to the fore as a way to understand any claim of having taken a children's perspective.

As our experiences have shown, the meanings constructed around photo-taking and the photos themselves are not only intertwined with various social and cultural processes in the child's and researcher's daily life and background, but also within the specific research situation at hand. Thus, taking a constructivist approach, oversimplified claims about participant-generated visual data immediately become problematic, urging us to examine in more detail the shifting faces of participation in a certain research context.

In the article, the role of mediated communication in this case photos has been considered a means to act, see and construct culture, a sense of belonging and media use. It shows how photos can encourage children to talk about matters that are important to them, providing the researcher with a plethora of daily images. Compared to visual realism (Pink 2001), in the two studies, the photos taken and the story behind a photo are seen as the outcome of how the child has chosen to position him/herself within a certain field and the specific perspective that evolves through that position; thus affecting how the child sees, thinks and acts, but also what he/she sees. In addition, adding a participatory photo-taking method to traditional methods such as interviews and participant observations, created more data in the two studies. All of the above-mentioned aspects are crucial to any attempt to gain more knowledge about a child's or young person's perspective on daily life (Qvarsell 2001).

Our two cases showed, for example, how photos in which children have chosen to categorize objects become a helpful means of gaining insights into issues related to media use, culture and sense of belonging, insights that may not easily be grasped in a straightforward question. Furthermore, the young informants' talks also developed from the present time to their past and future. That is, the object in the photograph can provide the researchers with additional and profound data in relation to time and space. Throughout the article, the need for talking with the young photo-taker about a photo is stressed, as it allows the researcher to develop an understanding of the meanings associated with a photo, and from what position it was produced. It involves how the photo-taker positions him/herself while talking about the photo to the researcher, where its attached meanings may be re-constructed. Meanings constructed in the context of interactions located in specific practices and time (Greig and Taylor 1999), which in

turn has implications for any claims about participant generated visual data. Comparing both studies, this became an important point for us. Most studies analyse photos (visual images) separate from the photo-takers (participants) and take the researchers' view's into the analysis. Through the process of analysis, children's perspectives may be interpreted differently by researchers.

As the studies have shown, the task of taking photos may make children feel more involved in the research and have greater influence on its content (depending, of course, on the task at hand). However, this participatory feature does not imply that the power relations between the researcher and child disappear. In fact, even if children state that they feel involved, this does not automatically mean that they are actually part of the research process. Here we find the distinction between passive and active participation useful (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). While the child may decide the main agenda of an interview based on the photos taken, it is still very often the researcher who finally interprets the stories behind a photo through different theoretical perspectives: what photos to present and in what context a certain photo is placed. It is also worth noting that the conditions of participation in a research setting are also affected by the age factor and the type of camera used. As for the former, both younger children, from 5-to-8 years, and younger adolescents, 12-to-16 year, took part. As shown above, we took different approaches: the photo-taking process and talk became a fun/play activity for the young children after having developed a relationship with the researcher, while the older youngsters in the Greek/Swedish study more specifically discussed the objects in the photos they had taken. The younger children were also much more restricted in terms of their mobility, that is, their ability to move in various public and private spaces without being put under surveillance by their mothers, or other adults for that matter.

Even if the central issues of participation and meaning-making have been reflected on throughout the present article based on experiences from two studies, it is significant to point out the possibilities of different visual methods in today's media landscape with its feature of intertextuality. Visual means of research are needed in any attempt to examine how the same or related texts or narratives are discernible in the child's media culture and the meanings attached to this culture by the photo-taker. Additionally, children's trends in popular culture change very fast (c.f. Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003), and these changes in style and taste that occur through taking photos with their own digital cameras or mobile phones can be more easily documented in future studies.

Notes

1. All families involved were assured that participation was voluntary and that the material would be confidential. When presenting the material, attempts were made to avoid identifying participants. Written permission had also been given by parents and children to use photos at conferences, for teaching purposes and in academic publications.

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