Ethical and methodological challenges in EU Kids Online III – accessing the field

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Today...

- Reflections on **general guidelines** for researching the online activities of children: privacy, confidentiality, consent, enhancing participation (giving voice, allowing self-expression and representation, enhancing agency)

- Presentation of specific **ethical and methodological challenges** in the EU Kids Online III fieldwork – examples of addressing ethical issues and field-accessing issues in (cross-)national contexts
EU Kids Online III Project

- 9 European countries were included: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Malta, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom (and Australia).

- Fieldwork from February to September 2013, 57 focus groups (N = 236) and 113 interviews (N = 113), with children aged 9-16 (in each country 6 focus groups, 2 per age group 9-10, 11-13, 14-16, and 12 interviews, balanced gender distribution).

- Ethics approval from LSE Research Ethics Committee.
Ethical and field-accessing issues

- UNCRC – children’s rights-focused agenda (emphasis on respects for persons, beneficence, and justice)
- Protection versus participation - inherent tension

- Access and selection issues
- Consent – challenges to informed consent
- Confidentiality and anonymity - challenges
- Giving voice to young people (attention to power dynamics, creating a safe space)
Challenges for access: enlisting the cooperation of schools

- Research seen as an inferior activity (to educational ones)

- The constraint of having the interviews/focus groups visible or in the presence of teachers

- Teachers exerting too much control over the selection process
# Finding and convincing schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Alternative to access participants</th>
<th>Personal contact moment before data collection</th>
<th>School’s cooperation in practical organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Yes – youth organization (Chiro)</td>
<td>Yes – parents</td>
<td><strong>Acceptable</strong> – only children who had finished schoolwork were allowed to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes – phone calls with principals</td>
<td><strong>Acceptable</strong> – little interest, but schools willing to participate proved very cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Yes – personal network of acquaintances</td>
<td>Yes – phone calls with principals</td>
<td><strong>Acceptable</strong> – distributed consent forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes – FtF meetings principals and/or teachers</td>
<td><strong>Poor</strong> in the upper secondary schools (researchers did everything); <strong>Good</strong> in the primary and lower secondary schools, where teachers collected consent forms and scheduled the focus groups/interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>Yes – personal networks</td>
<td>Yes – with parents and/or children recruited from personal networks</td>
<td><strong>Acceptable</strong> – schools helped in organizing the groups, finding participants and distributing consent forms, but they did not always follow instructions about single-gender focus groups and the numbers of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Yes – school librarians network</td>
<td>No</td>
<td><strong>Good</strong> – distributed consent forms and arranged times and places for data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Yes – partnership with school inspectorate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td><strong>Rather poor / acceptable</strong> in some cases– negative attitude towards research in schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Yes – personal network of acquaintances and helpline</td>
<td>No</td>
<td><strong>Good</strong> – no issues reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Yes – NGOs and personal network of acquaintances</td>
<td>Yes – FtF meetings principals and/or teachers</td>
<td><strong>Good in most schools</strong> – schools helped at organizing consents, recruiting children and providing locations; <strong>Poor in junior school</strong>, which did not allow individual interviews, and where focus groups had to be in visible, public space within the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Yes, partnership with independent school – using personal contacts</td>
<td>Yes – with key decision makers in relevant independent school</td>
<td><strong>Good</strong> – required a school-based champion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Selection of children: researchers versus teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Role of the researcher</th>
<th>Actors (besides researchers) having an impact on the selection process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Rather extensive – in one school only children who had finished schoolwork could be selected. For the focus groups with 14- to 16-year-olds, availability on a certain time and place determined participation</td>
<td>Teachers – selection of children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Czech Republic | Moderate – discuss basic selection criteria with principal or deputy/select children from a pool (e.g. those who had returned consent forms) | Principal and deputy – selection of classes  
Principal/deputy and teacher – asking for volunteers                                                                                                                                 |
| Greece         | Rather limited – priority to children who were regular internet users, media-savvy, open and cooperative | Principals and teachers – selection of children                                                                                                                                 |
| Italy          | Rather extensive in primary and lower secondary school – randomly selecting children among those with returned consents  
Rather limited in upper secondary school – rely on availability of 3 collaborating teachers | Principal (lower secondary school) – suggested leaving out a ‘problematic case’ and selecting another child  
Teachers (upper secondary school) – only those children who had a class with one of the collaborating teachers |
| Malta          | Limited for focus groups – school management selected the children (but did not take into account EU Kids Online criteria); rather extensive for interviews | Teachers and assistant heads – selection of children                                                                                                                                 |
| Portugal       | Rather limited – school librarians and teachers decided who was best for the research in accordance with the researcher’s instructions for diversity | School librarians and teachers (head of class) – selection of children                                                                                                                                 |
| Romania        | Moderate – discussion of selection criteria with teachers | Teachers – selection of children                                                                                                                                 |
| Spain          | Moderate – discussion of selection criteria with principal | Principal – selection of children                                                                                                                                 |
| UK             | Rather limited – teacher supplied the children | Teachers – selection of children                                                                                                                                 |
| Australia      | Rather extensive – select children from a pool (those who had returned consent, which is about one-third) | Any of the children who consented and whose parents had consented could be selected                                                                                                                                 |
Challenges to obtaining informed consent

- **Usually sought from adults** (parents, guardians, teachers)

- **Children should be informed** (UNCRC art 12, consulting children in decisions affecting their own lives)

- **Consent should not be coerced / obtained under pressure**; should be re-negotiable (difficult to assess if the child feels pressured/ hard to control power dynamics, e.g. teacher/ pupil)
Consent in EU Kids Online III

- **Data collection** – through schools, consent was needed for access

- **Forms (all countries):** consent forms parent/child, information letter parent; information letter teachers/principal, consent form principal

- **Other forms** (approvals from ministries/ national educational boards)

- **Children’s explicit consent:** legally required in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Malta, Australia

- **Child-centered approach to consent:** ensuring informed consent; challenges: teachers selecting children for participating
Challenges to participation and giving voice

- **Disputed approach** within the research field – degrees of children’s participation
- **Power asymmetries** researchers- young people, teachers- young people

- **Choices, presence and interventions of other adults** (teachers/ principals): teachers choosing the “best children”; interruptions and interventions from teachers;
- **Settings** like schools might be inhibiting
- **Little time to build trust** - poor, socially desirable answers
Children’s participation in research

Level of children's participation / Description (based on Hart's ladder of participation)
8 Children initiate the research, and share decision making with adults
7 Children initiate and direct the research
6 Adult-initiated, but shared decisions with children
5 Children are consulted and informed
4 Children are assigned an active role and are informed
3 Tokenism (sham participation)
2 Children are decoration
1 Children are manipulated

EU Kids Online III research – level 5
## Presence and interventions from others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Presence at focus groups</th>
<th>Type of intervention at focus groups</th>
<th>Presence at interviews</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Youth mentors (focus groups, aged 14-16)</td>
<td>FG, girls: regular interventions by female mentor, giving her personal opinion&lt;br&gt;FG, boys: mentor remained in the background, subtle encouragements to talk</td>
<td>Older brother (I-boy, 9-10)&lt;br&gt;Mother (2l, girls, 12-13)&lt;br&gt;Father (I, boy 12-13)</td>
<td>Older brother: encourages talk, sometimes gave more information&lt;br&gt;Mother: occasional interventions, gave some additional information&lt;br&gt;Father: no interventions, remained in background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Teachers, headmasters</td>
<td>No interventions, just transited the space (very rare)</td>
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<td>No interventions, just transited the space (very rare)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Teachers occasionally entered the room and discussion resumed after they left</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>No others present</td>
<td>No interventions</td>
<td>No others present</td>
<td>No interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>Head of school (one focus group)</td>
<td>In one FG: headmaster was present in final part of the FG/ participants sometimes involved him in the discussion&lt;br&gt;Other FG: interrupted momentarily by a teacher asking or giving information and/or instruction, no involvement</td>
<td>Cousin and a friend (one interview)</td>
<td>No interventions, the family members were on the other side of the room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Library users</td>
<td>No interventions, remained at a distance</td>
<td>No others present</td>
<td>No interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Teachers (three focus groups)&lt;br&gt;School librarian (two focus groups),</td>
<td>FG, girls aged 9-10: teacher briefly entered the room, girls were not bothered; FG, boys: teacher entered and announced exam, discussion ended; FG teacher entered and stayed for 10 minutes, discussion was disrupted; Interview / School librarian: no interventions, stayed at convenient distance</td>
<td>School librarian (one interview); library users</td>
<td>No interventions, stayed at convenient distance; library users transiting the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>No others present</td>
<td>No interventions</td>
<td>No others present</td>
<td>No interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Teachers and pupils</td>
<td>FG: people wandering and talking in the hall, no interventions&lt;br&gt;FG, girls: several classes entered the hall, focus group ended because of too much noise</td>
<td>Teacher present in two interviews (9-10 years old)</td>
<td>No intervention, but teachers sat right next to the researcher and listened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>No interventions, just transited the space</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>No interventions, just transited the space</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Challenges to ensuring privacy and confidentiality

- **Limits to ensuring confidentiality** – children disclosing illegal activities, children reporting on harm (that no one can ignore) to themselves or others.

- **Presence of teachers / other adults** – in itself a breach of privacy.

- **Teachers themselves not trusting children** with ethical behaviour towards disclosing private information about their peers.
Concluding remarks

- Challenges to cross-cultural qualitative research – multifaceted and complex – a lot of what you will able to obtain is already pre-determined by fieldwork conditions in national contexts (attitudes towards research, views on teachers and school’s role, views on children’s rights etc)

- Ethical and methodological issues – closely linked – ethical constraints limit methodological choices and vice-versa

- Remarks from colleagues directly involved in the data collection of EU Kids Online III
 Outputs


EuKidsOnline.net / reports

Innovative approaches for investigating how children understand risk in new media

Dealing with methodological and ethical challenges

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Thank you!

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INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT