

**INFORMED CONSENT IN SCHOOL-BASED ETHNOGRAPHY:
USING VISUAL MAGNETS TO EXPLORE PARTICIPATION, POWER AND
RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS**

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Abstract: This paper contributes to current ethical and methodological debates on informed consent in research with children and young people. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with young children (aged 5 to 7) and specifically on the use of photo-magnets which asked the children to indicate their ongoing opting in and out by moving magnetic pictures on a surface in the classroom. Using excerpts from field notes, the paper reflects on how the children's engagement with the magnets produced insights into their constructions of participation in research, power dynamics and the entanglement of informed consent procedures and research relationships. The paper concludes with stressing the importance of creating a space for conversations around these issues to happen as part of doing research.

Keywords: research with children, informed consent, visual methods, magnets, participation, power, research relationships

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my Ph.D. supervisors, Professor Liz Bondi and Professor Kay Tisdall from the University of Edinburgh, for their continued support and feedback. This research was funded through a Principal's Career Development Scholarship from the University of Edinburgh.

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In the past two decades, a growing body of research has discussed children and young people's participation in research and the ethical and methodological challenges arising in this process. Informed consent procedures in particular have become a generally accepted premise for ethical conduct in this kind of research, although their practicalities have been increasingly criticised and problematized by researchers in the field, as outlined in more detail below. In line with the overall aims of this special edition to re-evaluate accepted research practices in the childhood studies field, this paper contributes to such ethical and methodological debates in research with children and young people. It critically revisits the notion of informed consent by offering an illustrative account of informed consent procedures, particularly a visual practice using movable magnets, in school-based ethnographic research. Through embedding informed consent in epistemological debates, both in relation to childhood studies as well as around the co-construction of fieldwork interactions and knowledge(s), the paper illuminates the entanglement of children and young people's participation in research with power differences and research relationships. While it does not offer a "solution" to the problems of informed consent as a concept and process, it makes the case for the importance of sharing such ethical and methodological practices in research as a means of considering and accounting for the complex and multiple dynamics at play in our research contexts.

Since the paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with young children (aged 5 to 7), participants are referred to as "children" (rather than children and young people) throughout as a more appropriate term for this age group.

Informed Consent in Research with Children: Challenges and Tensions

In recent years, a growing body of literature has discussed issues around informed consent in relation to research with children and young people. Drawing on a review of the relevant literature, Gallagher (2009) describes four core principles of informed consent:

1. Consent involves an explicit act of expressing participants' willingness to take part in research.
2. It is based on participants' understanding of what they are consenting to.
3. It is given voluntarily and without coercion.
4. It must be renegotiable throughout the research process.

Alderson and Morrow (2011) define consent as "the invisible activity of evaluating information and making a decision, and the visible act of signifying the decision" (p. 101). The *informed* aspect of consent refers not only to the participants' comprehension of the research process, but also includes an understanding of "why their participation is necessary, how it will be used, and how and to whom it will be reported" (British Educational Research Association, 2011, p. 5). This constitutes an ambitious claim, requiring that not only participants, but first and foremost researchers, know the purpose and direction of their

research at all times during the research process. From this perspective, the *informed* aspect of consent has been criticised as a construct which is impossible to realise in qualitative research studies (Malone, 2003).

Most current social research ethics frameworks have originated from medical research ethics and are rooted in the first international code on research ethics, the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association [WMA], 1964/2013). The differences between medical and social research, however, produce specific tensions and challenges for ethical social research conduct and the notion of informed consent in particular. Especially in qualitative, ethnographic or open-ended studies, limitations of informed consent have been acknowledged in terms of the unpredictable nature and direction of this kind of research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Gallagher, 2009; Gallagher, Haywood, Jones, & Milne, 2010; Malone, 2003). In addition, researchers have pointed out the gaps between formalised institutional review boards, relying on abstract principles and codes, and the ethical challenges and “messiness” of doing research in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Guillemin & Heggen, 2009; Hem, Heggen, & Ruyter, 2007; Mason, 2002). Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 265), for example, distinguish between “procedural ethics” and “ethics in practice”, arguing that the former are insufficient and need to be complemented by a focus on their practical implications. They further state that reflexivity, applied to what researchers consider “ethically important moments” of day-to-day practices of research, can be a useful conceptual tool to achieve continuity between procedural and practical ethics. Procedural ethics (guidelines, codes, et cetera), particularly informed consent procedures, have also been accused of stifling debates around ethical issues and of serving to safeguard researchers and institutions rather than participants (Homan, 1991). Malone (2003) argues that institutional review boards which require qualitative researchers to fit their questions and dilemmas into a one-size-fits-all framework may even *prevent* debate around such issues, and thus serve neither researchers nor researched.

While the above can be seen as general challenges of informed consent, it has been argued that doing research with children and young people specifically amplifies inherent problems of the informed consent paradigm (Gallagher et al., 2010; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). In the past two decades, research in the childhood studies field has generally been framed by a “new” ontological paradigm which views children and young people as competent social actors, recognises the social construction of childhood, and acknowledges the diversity within this group (James & Prout, 1990). In line with this paradigm, it has been argued that participatory research approaches, which recognise children’s competencies, may assist in overcoming ethical problems in research with children (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). Viewing children as social actors, as full human beings rather than “becomings” (Qvortrup, 1994), has also led to a greater recognition of their human rights, especially civil and political rights, and there is thus a close affinity between the childhood studies and the children’s rights fields (Tisdall, 2012). While childhood studies recognises children’s *abilities* to participate actively in research processes, the children’s rights field stresses their *entitlement* to participation (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012), in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

However, there remain tensions between, on the one hand, ethical frameworks and social discourses that view children and young people as in need of protection from harm and as a particularly “vulnerable” group of research participants, and, on the other hand, the childhood studies and children’s rights field which promote children’s agency and participation. Bell (2008), appealing to researchers’ obligations to protect and promote children’s rights, argues that ethical research frameworks should be explicitly informed by

children's rights principles. Similarly, Skelton (2008) claims that institutional review boards have failed to integrate adequately the increasing recognition of children's competence into their frameworks. In research on topics that are considered to be sensitive, and when participants are perceived as particularly "vulnerable", these tensions between research epistemologies and ethical frameworks tend to be especially marked (Powell & Smith, 2009). Researchers' commitment to children and young people's participation may also be compromised through negotiations with gatekeepers (Heath, Charles, Crow, & Wiles, 2007; Ost, 2013).

However, such participatory approaches have also been critically discussed due to their potential tendency to implement adult researchers' agendas, whilst claiming to empower children and young people as participants (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), as well as a potential neglect of considering how power differences permeate and influence even child-centred, participatory approaches (Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2010). Issues around power differentials were particularly explored in debates on adults' roles in research with children, ranging from (contested) claims to a "least-adult role" (Mandell, 1988) to those of "friend" (Fine & Sandstrom, 1998) or "unusual adult" (Christensen, 2004).

Researchers have called for a greater acknowledgment of these limitations of informed consent, in order to: revise "the standard notions of research ethics that blur ethical sensibilities" (Malone, 2003, p. 812); give credence to feelings of unease about ethical dilemmas arising during research, while being critical of one's own and others' practice (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009); and, finally, achieve a greater awareness of the challenges produced by the specific research context (Gallagher et al., 2010). While these challenges of informed consent procedures are not limited to research with children and young people, it can be argued that the scrutiny under which researchers are placed from ethics review boards when working with this group of participants, as well as the particular attention to ontological and epistemological framings of research in this field, serve to highlight such complexities. This paper contributes to these debates by offering an in-depth case study of using magnets to visualise informed consent in a school-based ethnography, and by reflecting on insights this allowed into the children's constructions of their participation in the research, power dynamics, and research relationships.

The Research Context: Introducing Magnets to Visualise Informed Consent

This paper draws on my research which explored how ethnicity, gender, and social class intersect in young children's social identities and relationships in a culturally diverse primary school. In order to explore this thematic focus, I conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in a Scottish urban primary school with a composite P1/2 class of circa 25 5- to 7-year-old children. My fieldwork consisted mainly of participant observation in the classroom, lunch hall, playground, and other spaces of the school, as well as interviews with the children and staff.

In terms of "procedural ethics" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), I sought ethical approval from my university's ethics review board and the department of education services within the local city council. I then negotiated access with the headteacher of the school and the teachers of this particular class. I sought informed consent, through opt-out forms, from the parents whose children I wanted to involve in the research. A small number of parents opted out, but were still happy for me to have conversations with and include their children in any research activities, as long as I would not use these as data (dilemmas arising from this will be discussed below).

After successfully passing through the above ethical procedures, I began my fieldwork by coming into the classroom one afternoon a few weeks after the school year had begun. Sitting in a circle on the floor with the children, I handed out copies of a colourful information booklet to everyone and together we read through it. This involved introducing myself (as a researcher from the university who wanted to learn about children's everyday lives) and the purposes of the research (gaining understanding of what matters to children and about children's friendships). I invited and answered the children's questions and asked them to think about our conversation, and whether they would be interested to take part in this research over the course of the following days. A few days later, I came into the classroom again and revisited the information booklet. This time I pointed toward a space on the last page where I invited them to place a sticker (I provided a few attached to every booklet) if they wanted to take part in this research. This would involve speaking to me, and me taking notes about what they were doing and saying. I stressed that regardless of their decisions at this point, they would be able to change their minds at any time later. Almost all children opted in.

After this initial, rather traditional and contractual model of seeking consent, I started to increase my presence in the classroom until I went there on an almost daily basis. Over the course of the following weeks, I developed a routine for my participant observation, and it became clearer, both for the children and me, what this involved. From the beginning, I had perceived the information booklet and sticker consent form as an initial but not sufficient step in the consent process, and the first few weeks of fieldwork indeed illustrated some of its shortcomings. As I began to know the children better, it became clear that some were keener than others to be around, speak, and play with me. I did not know if this was due to their wish to take part in the research, to spend time with me as an "unusual adult" (Christensen, 2004), or both. I also did not know the motivations of those children who did not seek much contact with me, maybe because they were shy, because they did not like to be observed, or for other reasons. In addition, I came to realise that a number of explanations for my presence in the classroom circulated amongst the children, for example that I wanted to write a children's book or that I wanted to learn how to become a teacher.

Unsatisfied with the transparency of my role in the classroom and the research process, I searched for a way to clarify these issues, to prompt the children to consider their options within this process, and to communicate their choices to me. Inspired by Gallagher's (2009) use of colour-coded stickers worn by children on their clothes, I decided to introduce a visual system of movable magnets (Kustatscher, 2013, 2014). Incorporating an available space in the classroom, I marked the top drawer of a filing cabinet in the corner with a green-encircled magnetic picture of me as the "opt-in" drawer, and the second drawer with the same, but red-encircled and crossed-out magnetic picture of me, as the "opt-out" drawer. Each child received a magnetic picture of themselves and I invited them to move these pictures between the two designated surfaces (see Figure 1), depending on whether they wanted me to speak to them and take notes about them (I left the "speaking to" part relatively open on purpose, as it would have proven difficult not to interact with someone at all, but I was very clear that I would not take any notes about someone on the opt-out drawer). The teacher was supportive of the system, and since the class generally worked in groups moving freely around workstations in the classroom, the children were encouraged to walk over to the cabinet and move their pictures throughout the day.

The magnets were clearly visible from most corners of the classroom. Since the majority of the children's magnets were generally on the "opt-in" drawer of the filing cabinet, I made it a habit to glance at the "opt-out" drawer before joining individual or

groups of children and to avoid those who had opted out. Before moving to other spaces of the school (such as the playground or lunch/gym hall), I memorised or took a note of the children who were opting out at that moment, and did not approach them. Occasionally, however, children came up to and spoke to me despite having moved their magnet to the “opt-out” drawer. In such situations, I did remind them of their “opt-out” status, and asked whether they were happy for me to record our interactions or not. These practicalities of implementing the magnets already point to some of the challenges and limitations of an opt-in/opt-out conceptualisation of consent: On the one hand, it assumes that participants are able to make clear decisions between opting in or out, and that, even if shifting, these decisions are relatively stable over short periods of time, which may not be the case. On the other hand, this conceptualization also presupposes that researchers are able to rigorously respect participants’ decisions of opting in or out, which in practice may not be so straightforward; as ethnographers, our interpretations may be influenced by observations of events, whether we explicitly include them in our field notes or not. The following sections explore some of the benefits and limitations of the magnet model, and particularly the insights it produced into such challenges and limitations of the process of informed consent.

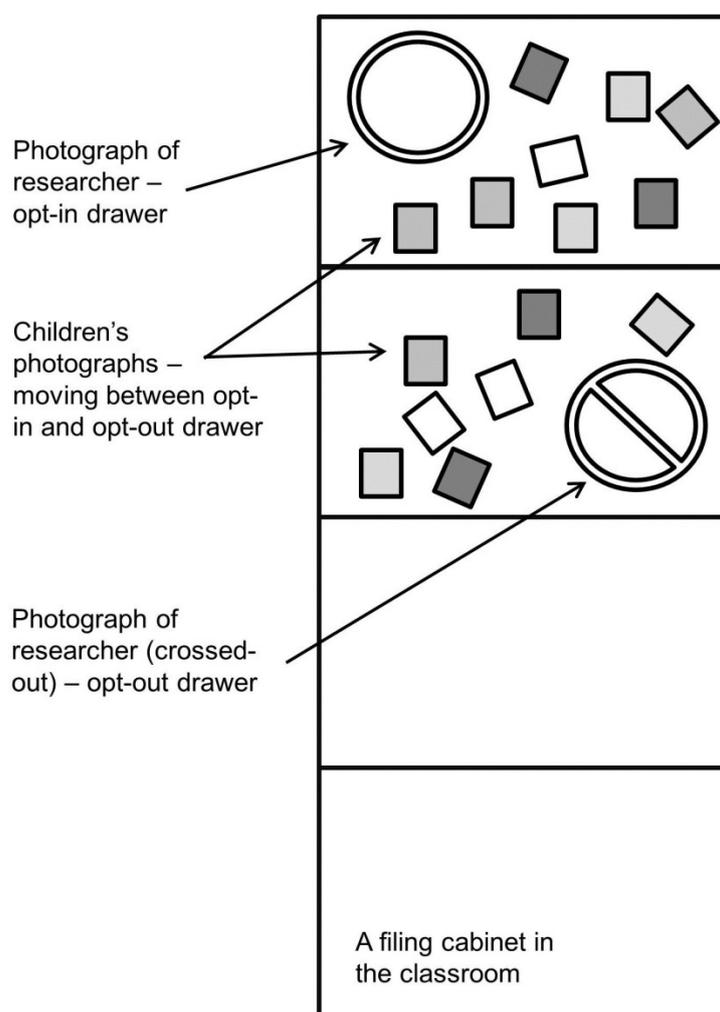


Figure 1: Movable magnetic photographs on a filing cabinet in the classroom

Insights into Consent Decisions: Context, Compliance, and Constructing Participation

From conversations with other researchers, as well as engaging with the relevant literature, I had become aware of how conducting research in a school context shapes the process of negotiating informed consent in particular ways. Valentine (1999), for example, argues that institutions, as gatekeepers, can prevent children from consenting by denying researchers access in the first place, but they may also operate on the opposite end of the spectrum by coercing children to take part in research. Moreover, school-based research with children often employs rather pedagogical methods, both in the construction of what counts as information, as well as in other consent procedures such as consent leaflets, and thus also ties into the specific power dynamics at play in such contexts (David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001).

Mindful of such dynamics, I carefully negotiated my role in the classroom with the management and teaching staff of the school prior to the start of my fieldwork. This included negotiating that I would not take on teaching assistant tasks which involved teacher-like roles and responsibilities, such as supporting children with academic tasks or being “in charge” of otherwise unsupervised groups. Rather, I constructed my role in the classroom as one of researcher, student/learner (learning from and about children), and as an “unusual adult” (Christensen, 2004, p. 174) interested in the children’s world, games, and interests, but without “dubious attempt[s] to be a child”.

Despite my attempts to avoid positioning myself as an authoritative person, the children’s initial use of the magnet model was heavily shaped by issues of compliance. Similar to Gallagher’s (2009) use of stickers, opting out was generally associated with being “bad” or “naughty”, and opting in as “good” or “well-behaved”. Especially at the beginning, the magnets enjoyed a novelty status and received much attention from everyone in the class, and opting in or out was therefore not just privately negotiated between individual children and me, but was publicly visible and debated. This led to situations in which some children pointed out to me that other children “did not want to talk to me”, and so both tried to denigrate others as well as positively distinguish themselves. Sometimes children also asked me for permission before moving their magnets. I tried to react to such incidents by repeatedly stressing that every option was equally acceptable, and that I would not be upset or angry if someone “did not want to talk to me”. I also asked the teacher, as an explicit authority figure and representative of the school as an institution, to back up my statements in order to emphasise the legitimacy of both opting in or out. However, not all children seemed to perceive the pressure of compliance as negative, and I had the impression that some thoroughly enjoyed being given the power to say “no” to an adult in this context and to perform what was perceived as a subversive act without any repercussions.

As the novelty status of the magnet model decreased over the course of a few weeks, issues of compliance and ascribing value to consent decisions seemed to retreat into the background and this allowed insights into other reasons for the children’s choices. In particular, it became clear that the children negotiated a number of different roles and demands within their lives at school, and that taking part in the research was perceived as a distinct addition to these and, as such, was carefully considered. For some children, taking part in the research seemed to have a playful or leisurely meaning, as the following excerpt from my field notes shows:

Raphael, Lorna and Patrick¹ are sitting on the carpet in front of the magnets and giggle.

Patrick stands up, takes his magnet and puts it on the opt-in drawer.

Lorna says to me: *Marlies, we are silly!*

I think she is referring to them chatting, giggling and not being silent and working.

Patrick says, pointing at the magnet: *Yes, that's why we want to talk to you Marlies!*

In this situation, Lorna and Patrick constructed taking part in the research as “silly”, although with a positive connotation. Similarly, my interactions with the children often consisted of “fun” activities, such as playing games, and it seemed that many were enjoying such unusual, playful interactions with an adult in the school context. In such moments, opting into the research seemed to offer a different and popular space to construct relationships and identities within the school, and created a bond between us based on the withdrawal from academic roles and performances.

While these examples show that taking part in the research was often perceived as a leisurely aspect of life in school, other situations illustrated that sometimes the research also seemed to present an additional demand on top of the children’s intense academic schedules. On one occasion, Sarah moved her magnet to the opt-out drawer when she was given a worksheet by the teacher and, after having completed it, opted back in, saying “*Marlies, now you can talk to me again*”. This illustrates that she may have perceived taking part in the research as a distraction or weight in addition to her academic tasks, and she clearly prioritised the latter. On another occasion, I witnessed how Eleanor explained to Aamil, who was pondering whether to opt-in or opt-out, that both decisions were fine, but suggested to opt-out “*if you’re tired or so*”, indicating that she too perceived taking part in the research as an additional, demanding task which required a certain amount of energy and commitment.

The fact that the children distinguished and prioritised between different roles and demands, such as doing academic tasks, playing games, and taking part in the research, was in contrast to my own expectations prior to the fieldwork: Since I had intended to observe children’s everyday lives at school, I had conceptualised their participation in the research as automatically comprising all their different roles within this context. The use of the magnets illustrated, however, that the children constantly constructed their different social and educational identities within the school, as well as their participation in the research, and that this involved engaging actively with and assuming responsibility for the participation in my research and the resulting co-construction of data. Thus, while I had anticipated the children would participate in the research in a specific way, they took an active part in co-constructing and negotiating their participation. This meant that also the process of informed consent, forming part of our interactions during the fieldwork, was co-constructed between the children and me, and therefore the use of the magnets inevitably went beyond my pre-conceptualised ideas and was negotiated and transformed by the children, as illustrated further in the following paragraphs.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

Problematizing Assumptions About Power Differences

Power relations, between children and adults, and participants and researchers, are of central importance in doing research with children and other groups. Power differentials range from adult researchers being able to choose their theoretical and epistemological standpoints (Mayall, 2002; Morrow, 2008) to the specific power relations at play in the research context (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Gallagher, 2009). The way in which we as researchers conceptualise and address power dynamics is also closely linked to how we position ourselves in relation to the above-described tensions between protective frameworks on the one hand, and rights-based or participatory approaches on the other hand (Cocks, 2006; Ost, 2013; Powell & Smith, 2009; Skelton, 2008). In line with Holt (2004), this paper advocates a complex understanding of power beyond the binaries of powerful adults/researchers and powerless children/participants.

Power relations do not only exist between researchers and participants but, in the case of research with children, often involve gatekeepers as third parties. As Heath et al. (2007) illustrate, gatekeepers or institutional practices may undermine researchers' commitment to child-centred practices. In my research, an example of this was the fact that a very small number of parents opted out of the research on behalf of their children. However (presumably in order to avoid the stigmatization of their children in the classroom), they were still happy for me to interact with them and include them in any activities with the rest of the class. This meant that they were also using the magnets, but – without their knowledge – I had to overrule their opt-in in order to observe the ethics protocol of the school and council as gatekeepers. While this left me feeling deeply uncomfortable about my ethical practice, I considered it to be the ethically most appropriate way forward in this situation. I justified this decision, firstly, through the fact that it would avoid the children feeling stigmatized or excluded from activities that the rest of the class were taking part in. Secondly, I was aware that, although these children did not appear as “characters” with pseudonyms in my thesis, they inevitably still informed my understanding and thinking. As pointed out previously, ethnographers are able to decide what to include or exclude from their field notes, but they may not be able to stop themselves from observing, and being influenced by, interactions and events in the field. For example, despite having been “opted-out” by their parents, these children played an important role for my reflections on the informed consent process, which ultimately led me to writing this paper. Apart from showing the complex power relations at play in the primary school, this example therefore also illustrates that a clear-cut opting-out or in may not be possible in ethnographic studies, as these children were neither completely “out” nor “in” my research.

Introducing the magnet model was an attempt to adopt “empowering research relations” (Holt, 2004, p. 18). While as an adult researcher I could be considered powerful in many ways in this context, I was also aware that the children ultimately acted as gatekeepers to their own worlds of games and relationships, rendering me relatively powerless (Fine & Sandstrom, 1998). The magnets were intended to visualize this form of power of the children, to make them aware of it and able to communicate it. While the previous section showed that this was realised to some extent (e.g., children telling me openly when they were [not] willing to engage with me), the magnets also brought some inherent power differences to the fore. This is illustrated, for example, in the following excerpt from my field notes:

Every now and then I remind the children what the magnets are here for. I ask if anyone has any questions about the magnets.

Paola raises her hand: *Marlies, why do you have a big one?*

I am taken aback for a moment. I have never considered that this would be a sign of unfairness or power difference. But I have given myself a magnet three times as big as the children's ones, with a different shape and colour!

Paola seems to have perceived this as some sort of privilege.

Taken by surprise, I produce a stuttering explanation: *I thought I'd take a bigger one so it is more clear and you can see it better...*

I had designated the opt-in and opt-out drawers both with a magnetic picture of me which, without much thought, I had designed much bigger than the children's magnetic pictures. I believe that, partly, I was driven by an intention to make the purpose of the drawers highly visible, although this process can also be viewed as my own "unconscious reproduction of dominant identity" (Holt, 2004, p. 13). However, for Paola, and maybe other children, having a bigger magnet was perceived as desirable and privileged. Thus, I had overlooked some basic underlying power differentials because they had not seemed significant to me, but they evidently were for some of the children.

A few months into the fieldwork I was pointed towards another dimension of such underlying power differences:

Sarah sits next to me in the classroom. Nodding her head, she points over to the magnets, and says: *Marlies, I wanted to talk to you yesterday but you were not here.*

While I came into the school almost every day during my fieldwork, there were days when other commitments prevented me from doing so. I had considered this in relation to what I might be missing on those days and in terms of the continuity of my relationships with the children, but I had not reflected on how my absence might be perceived from their perspectives. Sarah's casual comment made me realise that, while aiming to de-centre power on the participants, the choice between opting in or out was ultimately dependent on my own presence in the classroom and thus was limited in scope. This was illustrated even further when, over the course of my fieldwork, some children started to adapt their magnets to my presence, that is, they opted out when I was away and opted back in when I was there.

While problematizing my pre-conceptualised ideas about the informed consent process, the magnets thus also served as a tool for allowing conversations around ethics, participation, and power to happen between the children and me. These conversations revealed to me my own lack of awareness on the one hand and, on the other hand, the children's sensitivity to how my taken-for-granted practices were permeated by power differences and adult/researcher interpretations. While trying to de-centre power, or at least the *perception* of power through the visibility of the magnets, I was not able to de-centre my own place within the authority structures of the research context. Nevertheless, the children were able to exert some forms of power through their interpretations and appropriations of the magnet system.

In the same way as we cannot know ourselves *fully* as researchers despite our striving for reflexivity (Rose, 1997), such permeating power differences may be impossible to be brought to the fore or even "resolved". However, these research experiences

highlighted the importance of creating a space for conversations and negotiations of our preconceived research designs as part of an ethics as process.

The Entanglement of Informed Consent and Research Relationships

In recent years, increasing attention has been drawn to relationships and emotions in research, and their place in constructing and interpreting research data (Bondi, 2005). Qualitative research is heavily dependent on “good” research relationships characterised by trust and respect (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009) and, particularly in ethnographic research, much consideration has been given to establishing such rapport between researcher and participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As ethnographic researchers, we are not only “looking at” our participants, but rather are “being with” them (Wang, 2013). This means that our relationships with participants do not only allow us to “access” them, but become part of our data.

During my fieldwork, interactions around the magnet model brought relational dynamics, both among the children as well as between them and me, to the fore. I have already described peer pressure and compliance as relational factors for the children’s decisions to opt-in or opt-out. However, on other occasions, such as in the following example, the magnets’ scope for the expression of consent was amended in favour of expressing inclusive and exclusive dynamics in the children’s peer relationships:

Fatima tells Tahira that it was her turn at playing bingo (a maths activity this week), but Tahira ignores her.

Fatima starts to cry.

Tahira ignores the crying for a while, and finally says in a sharp tone: *Fatima, it’s just a game!*

Fatima gets up and walks over to the magnets. She takes her magnet, which was next to Tahira’s, and moves it far away from her. They are both on the opt-in drawer, but since there is not much space left there (and especially not much space to get far away from Tahira’s magnet) Fatima moves her magnet on the opt-out drawer.

In this situation, Fatima used the magnets to underline and publicly display her resentment towards Tahira. Removing her magnet from proximity to Tahira’s meant to opt-out from the research, although in this case visualizing her relationship (or non-relationship) with Tahira appeared to override, or at least permeate, the magnets’ meaning of giving or denying consent.

Situations such as this one brought the entanglement of informed consent procedures and relationships to the fore. The magnets’ scope for the expression of ongoing consent was mediated by, and inseparable from, relational dynamics – not only between the children, but also with me as a researcher. Similar to the above excerpt, the magnets also served to visualise relationships between the children and me:

Just before break time, the children gather on the carpet and drink their milk. I sit at the back of the group, close to the filing cabinet with the magnets. Lilly sits close to me and now turns around. She looks over to the magnets and I follow her glance.

She gets up and moves her magnet – it is already on the top drawer but now she moves it right next to the magnet with my picture, so that they touch each other. She says: *Marlies, I'm close to you!*

Alba, sucking on her milk next to us, now gets up and moves her magnet (which was on the opt-out drawer) up to Lilly's, and says: *I am close to you too!*

She pushes Lilly's magnet a bit away because it takes up space next to mine, and Lilly protests. They both move around the magnets for a bit until they are both squeezed in next to mine.

The example illustrates how closely relational dynamics are linked to the process of informed consent. Alba opted into the research in order to “be close to me”, and it seemed that this closeness was more important than the aspect of (not) consenting to the research. Lilly's “*I am close to you*” may also be interpreted as an ownership claim on me, and indeed the ensuing struggle of shifting the magnets closer to me showed a competitive dynamic between the children.

Such events pointed to the fact that, as the children got used to the magnets and our relationships developed over time, the meanings of the magnet practice also developed and changed. In some cases, the developing relationship between me the children and me, including the developing trust that opting-out would not be disciplined and detract from our relationship, may have increased their confidence to opt-out. On the other hand, the magnets became a visualization of relationships in the classroom, both between the children and with me as a researcher. This meant that the magnets were always moved, and therefore consent decisions always made, in relation to others.

Guillemin and Heggen (2009), drawing on the work of the Danish philosopher Løgstrup (1956/1997), use the metaphor of “inner circles” to describe the relationships between participants and researchers. These inner circles are imagined as different degrees of intimacy in social relationships, from the outer zones of our public selves, to the innermost zone of our deepest private thoughts. Within this metaphor, all human beings are potentially vulnerable if they allow others to enter into their inner circles, and thus vulnerability is not a “weakness” to overcome, or a characteristic of particular groups, but a fundamental principle of being human. I find it useful to apply this metaphor to the process of informed consent, since it follows that consent is not only about saying “yes” or “no” to participation in research, but also about making a decision about which inner circles participants allow researchers to enter into, and therefore about establishing and managing a relationship with the researcher.

Informed consent processes are based on the participants' understanding of the implications of engaging and participating in the research, or withdrawing from it. In ethnographic research, relationships – interactions, emotions, thoughts – become part of the data. As researchers, we prefer to centre our own knowledge of the participants' understanding (i.e., we assume to know what they know) in order to legitimise the principle of informed consent. However, viewing informed consent as a fundamentally relational process, as illustrated by the children's use of the magnets, also means to recognize that while it may be possible to opt-out of the research aspect, it may be impossible to withdraw from a research *relationship* once access into one's “inner circles” has been granted. This means that the children are tied into participation in the research at least in some form, and the idea of flexibly opting in and out of the research becomes illusory.

Conclusion

Informed consent procedures have become an accepted premise for ethical conduct in social research generally, and tend to be especially highlighted and debated in research with children and young people. In this paper I have offered an in-depth case study of how I have approached these procedures in my research, and the challenges and insights this produced. Through introducing movable magnets for opting in or out, I have attempted to visualize and make communicable the children's ongoing consent decisions. While indeed the children made use of the magnets in ways I had anticipated to some extent, the magnets also highlighted complex and unpredictable dynamics around informed consent. In particular, they allowed insights into the children's motivations for opting in and out, and the ways in which they actively constructed their participation in the research. They also helped to illuminate how taken-for-granted assumptions about power differences permeate the underlying principles of the consent model, and how consent and relationships are intrinsically entangled.

Paying attention to epistemological assumptions underlying both our methodological as well as ethical frameworks, and potential inherent tensions, does not necessarily lead to more clarity or "solutions" for problems of informed consent as a concept. Acknowledging the co-constructed and relational nature of our fieldwork interactions, consent procedures and power dynamics, however, means to recognise and accept that such problems cannot be resolved or predicted. Using the magnets proved useful in creating a space in which it was possible for such conversations, around participation, power and research relationships, to emerge between the children and me, and to allow glimpses into the experience of research from my participants' points of view.

This paper contributes to a growing body of literature which debates and challenges issues around informed consent, in research with children and young people and beyond. I hope that with my illustrative account of using movable magnets to visualise informed consent, I have not only showed the importance of creating a space for conversations around these issues to happen in the classroom, but also made the case for creating and preserving this space for conversation in the academic community concerning these issues in a range of contexts and from multiple perspectives. Sharing our experiences of research and ethics in practice may, while not solving epistemological tensions, help to reassess and develop our approaches further as a community of researchers.

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