

# REGARDING CHILDREN'S PAIN

## Limitations of a child-centered research approach in sensitive research

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## Interview with Nona (16 years) - survivor of a traffic accident

It was a Saturday, quite early. It was at the traffic lights. The light was red and a truck was standing next to me.

The light turned green, I moved forward, and he moved forward. I tried to avoid him, but he turned right. I did look and did scream. But he did not hear me. And then he hit me.

From the moment I was under the truck, I don't remember anything. Only afterwards that I was lying there. I remember what my leg looked like and things like that.

And there was this woman who tried to keep me awake because the only thing I wanted to do was sleep. She asked me where I lived and my name and so on. Constantly. I thought she was annoying.



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I remember very well what my leg looked like.

*And that wasn't good?*

No. Do I have to talk about it?

*Only if you want to.*

I was lying on my back and I saw my knee. It was lying there as if... well, the only thing that was still fixed to it was... it was broken off... like a stick... it was probably the bone... with bits of skin.

And I thought 'Can I still move my toes?' and I looked but there was no foot.

It was lying a bit further away on the road... and there was someone from our neighborhood who told me to stay calm.



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A voice for young road traffic victims. Qualitative research on the experience of a road traffic accident and it's aftermath

*Funding and collaboration: FWO, UGENT (prof. G. Van Hove),  
Onderzoekscentrum Kind & Samenleving*

## Theoretical underpinnings

Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Anthropology of Childhood, Sociology of Childhood, Narrative Research

*Children as actors in their own right, entitled to their own perspective and as people who try to make sense of their world and themselves (for one) through narratives.*

## Participants

26 young people between 10 and 18 years

26 parents of young road traffic victims

Methodology: in-depth interviews



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A child-centred research approach highlights 3 central topics:

1. Competence
2. Power
3. Vulnerability

Interviewing children who survived a traumatic experience

⇒ Fundamental research question concerning methodology and ethics



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## 1. Children's level of competence?

Methods to deal with children's level of understanding and communication skills

However!

Young road traffic victims = 'experienced' children

- extensive 'expert' vocabulary concerning medical treatments and psychological support
- obliged to take important life decisions

ex. Lize (14 years) has to decide if she will let her leg be amputated because of possible infections

ex. Michael (12 years) thinks about committing suicide when in rehabilitation centre



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## 1. Children's level of competence?

Children describe themselves as 'different' from their peers = more grown-up

Competence is difficult to predict.

Individual approach is necessary

⇒ Competence or incompetence lies with the researcher.

⇒ Only in the actual encounter with these children a researcher can try to find a language with the child to talk about their experience.



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## 2. Power in interview encounters: dealing only with children's lack of power?

Power imbalance between adult researcher and child participant

=> Methods to minimize power differential

Ex. non-threatening interview climate, emphasizing children's expertise concerning their own experience, respect, reassuring, clear information, attitude, etc.

**However!**

Power is not one-dimensional, something that can easily be minimized or increased, given or taken away.





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## 2. Power in interview encounters: dealing only with children's lack of power?

Ex. Tom, 14 years, 18 months after the accident, 2 weeks after additional surgery

- Expert from 2nd interview
- Topic: publication of Tom's story in a book and his (contradictory?) wish to be seen as a 'normal boy'



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## 2. Power in interview encounters: dealing only with children's lack of power?

*What the journalist ultimately wrote, is it a bit...?*

No, the journalist made a story out of it, otherwise it wouldn't be interesting to read

*To read... But does it reflect your experience?*

Yes, but it's more, it's not as if it neatly goes around. It's more piece per piece. Normal.

*What do you mean 'goes around'?*

Well yes, it's more... I believe it's more like... I don't know. I didn't read it. I won't read it. I don't need to know what's in it. The journalist can choose what he writes.

... / ...



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## 2. Power in interview encounters: dealing only with children's lack of power?

... / ...

*Do you regret is somewhat?*

Surely my mother told you that! [in a fast and questioning tone]

*That you didn't want the publication to lie around here, and that you didn't tell anyone about it.*

No. But I don't care. That stupid book.

No.

Pooh [sighs]

[silence]



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## 2. Power in interview encounters: dealing only with children's lack of power?

Tom's reaction: Talking softly, almost whispering, talking vaguely and refusing to explain what he means, getting angry and remaining silent

= 'a rich point' (Agar, 1999)

Tom's reaction  $\neq$  submission to the interviewer's power

= active resistance

= management of narrative identity

= confrontation with existing power relations outside of the interview context

Power is not one-dimensional, something that can easily be minimized or increased, given or taken away.



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## 3. Regarding vulnerability

Children's subordinate position in society makes them vulnerable

⇒ Methods to protect children: trust, rapport, confidentiality, stop/pauze, space for experiences of resilience and agency, ...

However!

Young road traffic victims: + injured + sensitive research topic

⇒ interviews can be retraumatising (Pandora's box)

Was it worth the risk?!

⇒ Only research of happy and carefree children about enjoyable and pleasant themes?



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## 3. Regarding vulnerability

Protection of children in sensitive research is not the only ethical thing to do

⇒ Including children in sensitive research

⇒ Listening to children's experience ⇔ 'oath of secrecy'

*"By depriving children of their stories, you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words"* A. MacIntyre

*"Regarding the pain of others"* S. Sontag

⇒ no sanitizing and thus falsifying horrifying experiences.  
Sontag calls on us to watch and listen.



## 4. Conclusion and discussion

1. **Competence:** Only in the actual encounter with children researchers can begin to understand how these children can and wish to share their experiences. The researcher must have the competence to be able to listen and to find a language to endorse the children's story.
2. **Power:** Both researcher and participant are caught in existing power relations that will affect the interview
3. **Vulnerability:** In sensitive research, possible negative consequences for children are always possible. It is an ethical act in itself to give children the opportunity to express difficult experiences.



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