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## Ethical questions regarding the place of the child in ethnographic research at the children's home

Julie Chapeau - EUSARF 2021

To introduce this communication about "Ethical questions regarding the place of the child in ethnographic research at the children's home", I would like to quote William Lillie from his classic book called *An introduction to ethics*:

« *The question for ethics is not whether such an action was deliberately willed but whether the doer could have prevented it by taking thought about it* (Lillie, 1948) »

With this in mind, how can we design an ethical framework adapted to ethnographic research at the children's home? (Tillard & Robin, 2010) How would we "*be prepared to expect the unexpected*" as Virginia Morrow recommends? (Alderson & Morrow, 2020) What should we anticipate?

If ethics in research involving children has become a major concern for researchers and very well documented, there is still a lack of knowledge about home-based ethnographies involving children, especially in the field of child protection.

- As Ferguson shows, a lot of so-called ethnographic researches in the field use a repertoire of various techniques but practice ethnographies and particularly participant observations at home are "very rare in child and family social work" (Ferguson, 2016).
- This scarcity can be explained by the difficulties to access to the fieldwork, but moreover by strong ethical issues related to this research design (even ethics committee's rejection for example).

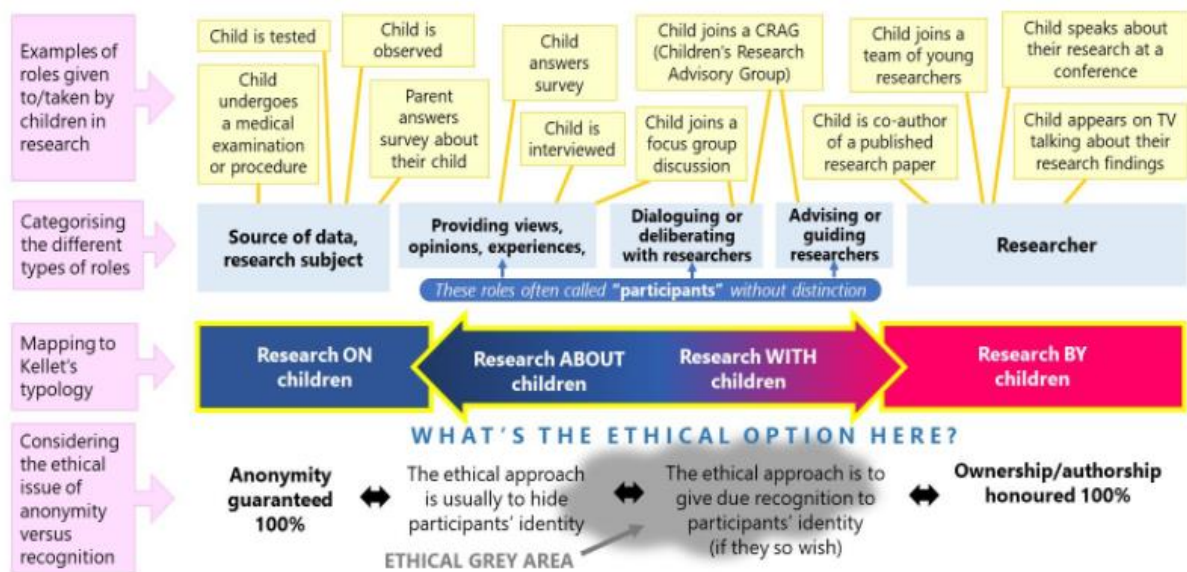
Also, Ruch says that "*Endeavouring to access more "direct" or "honest" accounts of what actually happens in encounters between social workers and vulnerable children, however, is fraught with ethical difficulties, not least determining how, and from whom, to obtain informed consent*" (Ruch, 2014), quoted by (Ferguson, 2016, 157)

**Thus, is promoting an ethical approach in this research design an impossible challenge?**

From one case examined in my study, I will identify issues arising and will make recommendations to adjust research ethics in France and provide ethical guidelines for this type of research.

My doctoral research is based on what (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012) called in 2012 "practice ethnography". That means face-to-face interactions between social workers and service users (305) and more specifically practice-near ethnography in so far as my research considers the emotional and unconscious aspects of practices as suggest (Froggett & Briggs, 2012). I conducted participant observation of French social workers during one week per month from January to September 2019. I followed 12 social workers who visited 6 families and 22 children aged 0 to 14 years old at the children's home, the office and in neutral venues...

Looking at the scheme drew by Harry Shier, my research was clearly ON protected children.



Shier, 2021 – From <https://childethics.com/blog/anonymity-or-recognition/>

The main issues related to this type of research were:

1. *Obtain informed consent, which*
  - Convinces or overstep the gatekeepers (Flewitt\*, 2005)
  - Assesses the child's *capacity* of discernment (still unclear in the French law)
  - Guarantees ongoing consent
2. *Prevent risks related to the vulnerability of the protected children, such as:*
  - Revictimization
  - Iatrogenic effects (attachment issues, fear and rejection)

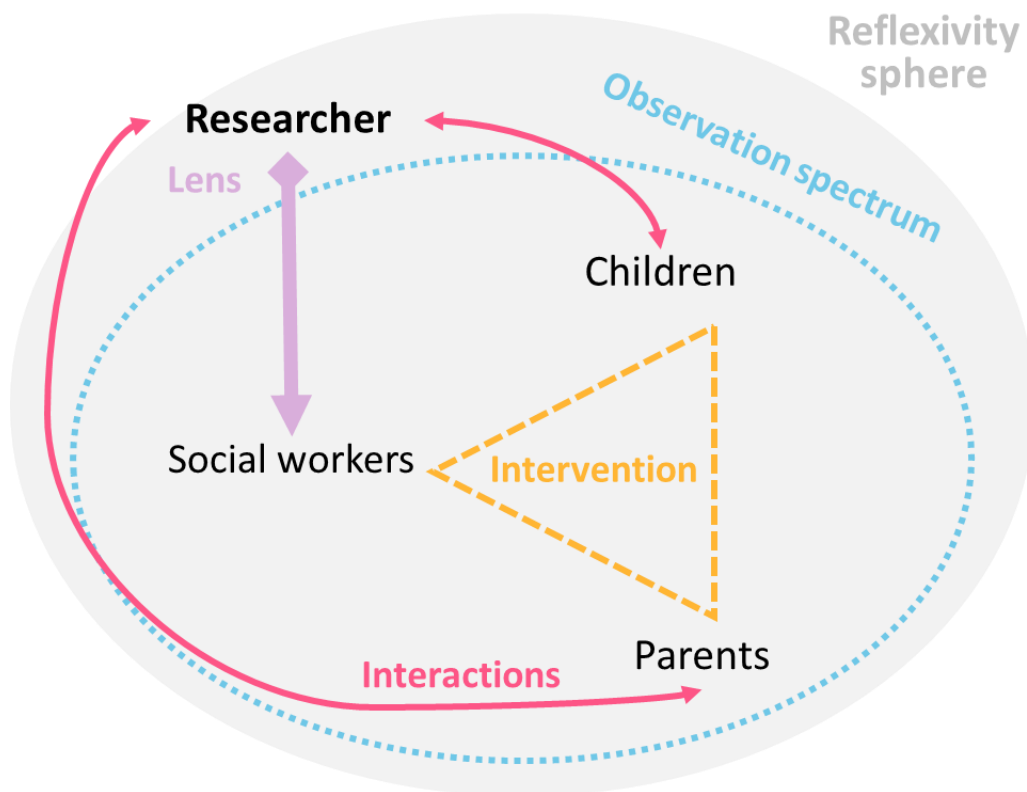
### Why did I choose this research design?

Because in the context of home-placement -which imposes a high frequency of home visits-, I wanted to highlight what really happens during the visits, how it impacts the adult/parents' relationship and the daily life, but also to unfold social worker's practices and especially their emotional labour. I was deliberately on the side of the "intervention", spending most of my time with the social workers. The relationship I established with the family I visited relied a lot on their own relationship with the practitioners. I was a complete stranger when the family was reluctant to the intervention or a facilitator who played with the child and doing so allowed the social worker to have a private conversation with the mom for example.

My choice was to let me carried by the intervention dynamic, to stay open to deliberate interactions with the parents or the children and to be attentive to what they said and expressed. I assumed an "immature methodology" defined by (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) as an attitude that positions researchers as 'experimenting and creating' a world with others rather than reporting on things as they are in an observed world". (Dennis & Huf, 2020)

In that configuration, I was entangled between the field of my research and the field of intervention, interfering in the family intimacy. Looking at the intervention dynamic through

the lens of the social workers, my role was ambiguous for the children. Sticking to the social workers 'practices, I was at risk of habituation and of participating to the invisibilization of the children.



*Research field ecosystem - Chapeau, 2021*

To illustrate that, let's introduce the vignette presenting Sarah, an "ethically important moment" as described by (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

She was 4 years old during the participant observation. She is a brilliant little girl, playful and full of questions. She has been back home with her two younger sisters since a few months. An emergency placement was court-ordered after a serious household accident. She was placed in a residential care facility without her sisters for one year.

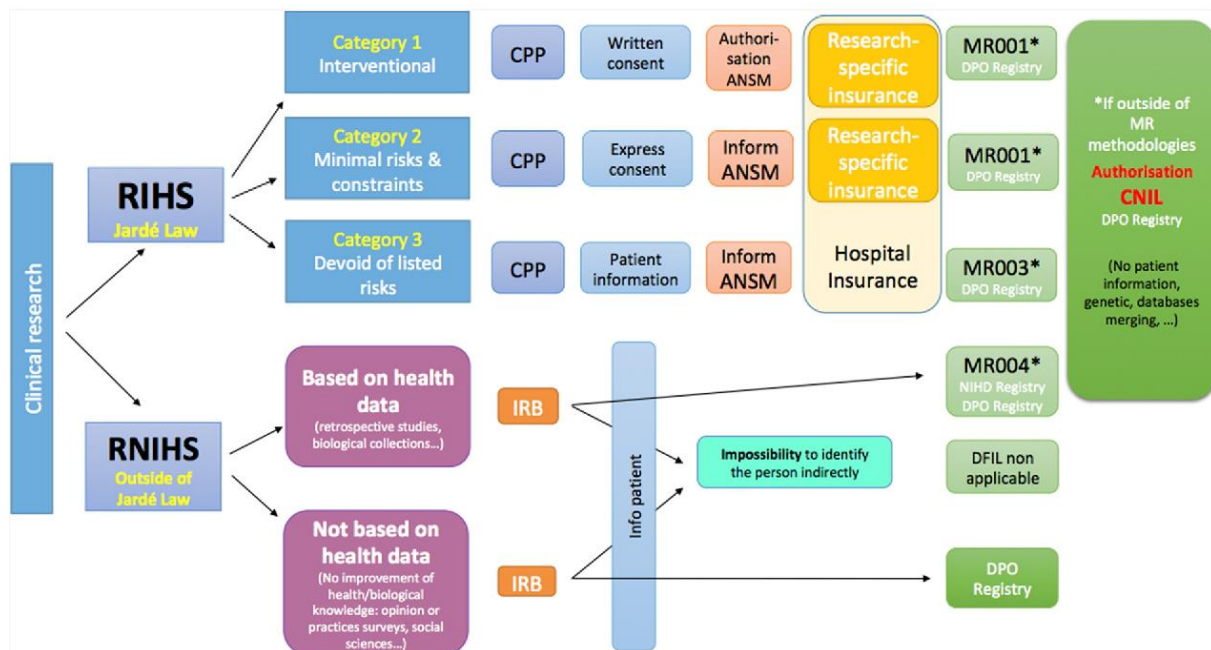
At the beginning of the interventions, Sarah was always angry especially at the adults around her. The intervention had a very positive impact on her behaviour week after week. She experienced less temper tantrums and agitation. But when I visited Sarah, she was much different than usual. One day, the social worker asked her why she was nervous in my presence. The mom replied: *"Because she is afraid of Julie; she doesn't understand why she is here. She is scared of the white car, the one which brought her to the emergency shelter"*

I didn't have the time to say something before the mom told Sarah: *"You have to know; Julie is here because she is writing a book about children"*. The girl then was really curious about the book and her attitude toward myself was suddenly different. I took the time to answer her every single question. Doing that, I moved from the dangerous stranger to an interesting figure.

## What did I miss in my research process?

The agitation of Sarah was a clear sign of changing consent, even though she was not able to express it clearly. Yet, I have respected ethical guidelines so far, the French ones at least.

In France, research ethics in human sciences are not regulated, including research involving children. Indeed, they have been excluded from the Jardé law in 2012 and implementing decrees so far.



Toulouse, E., Masseguin, C., Lafont, B., McGurk, G., Harbonn, A., Roberts, J.A., Granier, S., Dupeyron, A., & Bazin, J. (2018). French legal approach to clinical research. *Anaesthesia, critical care & pain medicine*, 37 6, 607-614 .

However, we can't say that investigations in human sciences are in the grey area of research ethics:

- The ministerial decree of 25 May 2016 requires every PhD student to undergo basic training on research ethics and scientific integrity.
- More and more universities and research units have set up an ethics committee which is asked to render an advisory opinion on research projects. (no compulsory)
- Researchers have to request an authorization from the CNIL (which is in charge of protection of personal data) to collect data.

Even more, PhD students are encouraged to complete their ethics self-assessment before starting the fieldwork, seize the ethics committee, create info sheets and ask participants to sign consent forms. Dissertation committees can evaluate PhD students on their ethical approach even if they are not required to.

... But insufficient attention is paid in this framework to children's rights and needs and ethical adjustments.

## How did I develop and apply my ethical approach?

Procedural ethics. I started my PhD on 2017, just one year after the publication of the decree. I attended the research ethics training while starting the fieldwork and completed my ethics self-assessment. But I didn't have the chance to request the opinion of the ethics committee because of bad timing.

I started working with the local authority representatives, practitioners and my supervisor on an ethical charter. This charter presents the research framework and design and ethical principles; terms and conditions about information on the research, consent, anonymity and professional secrecy, and researcher responsibility. Considering the specific issues related to the field of child protection, the discussion with the representatives was sometimes tough but really important. It made us realise our perceptual difference of child endangerment and the need or not to break professional secrecy (Monceau, 2017). Doing so, I stepped up to be recognized as a researcher and not a practitioner and the responsibilities this imposes. (Bruggeman, 2011).

### Ethic charter

#### Principes éthiques

##### Posture du chercheur

**Après de l'équipe**  
Le chercheur s'engage à ne pas faire obstacle et à ne pas interférer au cours de l'intervention professionnelle. Un intérêt majeur sera porté au respect de l'intégrité professionnelle.

**Au domicile des familles**  
Le chercheur s'engage au respect des mêmes règles que le service dans le cadre d'interventions au domicile des familles et à adopter une posture neutre et bienveillante tout au long de l'intervention.

##### Respect de l'anonymat

**Rappel des règles en éthique humaine dans la recherche**  
Voir les conditions : <http://www.afpsy.org/deontologie-et-ethique-de-la.html>

**Dispositions spécifiques et engagement**  
Lors de la retranscription des données, le chercheur s'engage à anonymiser tout élément permettant de reconnaître la famille (noms, profession, implantation géographique, informations personnelles...). Des noms d'emprunt seront utilisés. Toute retranscription d'éléments monographiques sera étudiée par le comité éthique de l'université.

##### Respect du secret professionnel

**Transmission d'informations concernant l'identification d'un risque de danger ou d'un danger**  
La transmission d'éléments de danger suit les mêmes règles que celles édictées dans les textes juridiques dédiés. Les autorités responsables seront informées des éléments de danger dans les conditions prévues par le cadre législatif.

**Retranscription d'informations à caractère confidentiel**  
Les éléments relevant de cette liste d'informations à caractère confidentiel ne devront pas être transmis :

- Nom, prénom
- Adresse
- Emploi
- Informations médicales
- Informations relevant du secret professionnel

CHARTRE ETHIQUE

## FORMULAIRE D'ACCOMPAGNEMENT DES FAMILLES PARTICIPANTES

Je m'appelle :

Je suis d'accord pour participer à l'étude sur le service SERAD qui intervient à mon domicile. L'étude s'intitule : « L'accompagnement à pérennisation des sorties d'accueil, étude croisée du placement à domicile comme dispositif de retour en famille ».

Cela signifie qu'une chercheuse, Julie CHAPEAU, accompagnera quelques fois par mois les professionnels du service à mon domicile et dans d'autres lieux entre janvier 2019 et l'automne 2019. Je serai prévenu(e) à l'avance de sa venue et je suis libre d'accepter sa présence à mon domicile. Je suis informé(e) et d'accord que Julie CHAPEAU assistera également aux actions collectives auxquelles je participe ainsi qu'aux réunions avec l'équipe qui peuvent me concerner. Je suis aussi disponible pour un entretien individuel, au début de l'observation et à sa fin pour échanger autour de l'intervention.

Je sais que Julie CHAPEAU s'est engagée à respecter mon anonymat et le secret professionnel. Je sais également que les informations qu'elle partagera dans son étude ne permettront pas de me reconnaître.

Je peux demander toutes les informations utiles pour moi (moment des rencontres, déroulé des entretiens, questions sur la recherche...). Ma participation ne m'empêchera pas de faire les choses que je fais habituellement et ne gênera pas mon quotidien, sinon j'en ferai part aux professionnels. Je pourrai décider d'arrêter de participer si je le souhaite, sans avoir à expliquer pourquoi.

Je suis d'accord avec les modalités présentées ci-dessus :

Date :

Signature :

### Information sheet

**Présentation de la recherche**  
Etude des effets du SERAD sur les familles bénéficiaires

Madame, Monsieur,  
Le Département de la Moselle a été choisi pour être le terrain d'une recherche sur le placement à domicile, qui est aujourd'hui mis en place par le SERAD. Cette recherche est réalisée par Julie CHAPEAU dans le cadre de sa thèse de doctorat en sciences de l'éducation réalisée à l'Université Paris Nanterre.  
Pour ce faire, Julie CHAPEAU a rencontré des services en France et à l'étranger, et d'autres chercheurs spécialisés sur ce sujet. Pour poursuivre sa recherche, Julie CHAPEAU sera amenée à suivre deux services, le SERAD petite enfance et le SERAD du château de Lorry pendant plusieurs mois. Cela signifie qu'elle accompagnera les professionnels lorsqu'ils viendront à votre rencontre, si vous en êtes d'accord. Si c'est le cas, vous allez recevoir une feuille pour donner votre consentement, puis rencontrer la chercheuse.

**À quoi ça sert ?**  
1. Mieux connaître les pratiques des professionnels dans le cadre du SERAD  
2. Comprendre les effets du SERAD sur la famille, les enfants et leur environnement  
3. Améliorer l'accompagnement qu'on propose aux familles

**Comment ça va se passer ?**  
Quel ? : Temps d'observation semi-participante au service, en lieu neutre et au domicile.  
Qui ? : Par une chercheuse  
Quand ? : entre janvier 2019 et l'automne 2019, 1 semaine par mois  
Où ? : à votre domicile, en temps collectif, au service  
Comment ? :  
1<sup>re</sup> étape : Une première rencontre où on explique la démarche, on signe l'accord et on réalise un premier entretien sur la vision de l'accompagnement proposé  
2<sup>ème</sup> étape : Accompagnement des professionnels lors de leur intervention à votre domicile, en lieu neutre, en service  
3<sup>ème</sup> étape : Un entretien final où on revient la vision de l'accompagnement, les apports perçus etc...

**Qui est la chercheuse ?**  
Après des études en politiques sociales à Grenoble et au Canada, et plusieurs expériences auprès des enfants et de leur famille (animation, interventions éducatives à l'école, enseignement en école maternelle...), Julie CHAPEAU a souhaité faire une thèse en sciences de l'éducation sur le placement à domicile, pour mieux comprendre ses apports pour les familles.

**Qu'est-ce qui va être fait des observations ?**  
Pendant le temps d'observation, la chercheuse ne prendra pas de notes. Elle intégrera ce qui a été observé dans son analyse.  
Les entretiens avec les personnes accompagnées seront enregistrés par un dictaphone mais ne seront pas diffusés. Ils serviront pour la retranscription des notes. Tout ce qui sera retranscrit sera anonyme et aucune information permettant de reconnaître un membre du service ou de la famille sera publiée.

**Pour obtenir plus d'informations**  
[j.chapeau@groupe-eneis.com](mailto:j.chapeau@groupe-eneis.com)  
06 22 01 36 81

### Consent form

Alongside, I co-created the ethical material with the local authority and the child protection services involved in the research. Before visiting the family, the social workers had to transmit the info sheet and explain orally the goal of the research to obtain the prior consent of the parents. For the first visit, I was allowed to take time with the parents to introduce the research and ask for their consent, while social workers intervened with the children. I offered the possibility for parents to think about it for one month. I made clear that I won't intervene during the visits and I won't write notes at their home, even knowing that this would impact the quality of my data. I paid more attention to detail the anonymization process and my researcher's responsibility in the context of my observations. If they agreed and signed the consent form, I began the observation after explaining orally the research and my role to children presents considering their young age. If they were able to, I read to them the consent form and I allowed them to sign it if they wanted to. They could call me Julie, in contrary to the social workers who were named M.X Miss Y, and use the informal "you" to talk with me. I didn't want to appropriate "the least adult role" described by (Mandell, 1991) and more recently (Atkinson, 2019) (Horton, 2008). But I wanted them to make a difference between me and the social workers.

### **Was my research really ethical, especially toward the children involved?**

Respecting main ethical guidelines helped me to assess and anticipate most of the risks, particularly those incurred to the vulnerable children and if the potential research outcomes and potential benefits merit these risks. But I wasn't really prepared to deal with ethical issues arising in the fieldwork.

Yes, it is necessary to increase knowledge about home-based interventions and improve practices from that research results (Deshayes, 2016; Tillard, 2010). But I don't totally agree with Ferguson when he says that "a researcher can be present at child protection encounters without having a negative impact on practice or service users" (Ferguson, 2016). He obliterates the responsibility of the ethnographer. Sarah's story shows us that it's impossible to anticipate what happens for the children in our presence.

The most important in this situation is ongoing attention AND REFLEXIVITY. I cite "*Being reflexive in an ethical sense means acknowledging and being sensitized to the microethical dimensions of research practice and in doing so, being alert to and prepared for ways of dealing with the ethical tensions that arise.*" Tensions can also have a positive impact on the data collection process and on the participants.

Now, let's think about the story of Sarah a bit differently. The agitation of Sarah expressed something which go further than changing consent. Reacting to my presence, she tried to verbalize her need to be reassured about the reunification process, which has never been discussed before. After having presented my research, the social worker seized the opportunity to talk with her about the separation and the reasons for his intervention. My "situatedness" contributed to give Sarah voice and to obtain new data. This example illustrates that "most fascinating insights of my research emerged from children acting in unexpected ways", noted Gallacher and Gallagher (508).

Whereas “Ethics is so often seen as an extra rather separate set of tasks that researchers have to complete.” reminds us Patricia Alderson, I would recommend to adapt procedural ethics in France and to reinforce the awareness of micro-ethics issues by:

- Translating, adapting and **disseminating** research ethics resources developed in others countries in France
- Systematizing research projects involving children assessment by research ethics committees and ongoing monitoring by dissertation committees and supervisors
- Developing specific training and adapting ethics self-assessment guides to the issues related to the participation of protected children (Renold et al., 2008)
- Increasing knowledge about research issues in the context of home-based ethnographies involving children.

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