Author(s): Pirskanen, Henna; Jokinen, Kimmo; Kallinen, Kati; Minna, Harju-Veijola; Rautakorpi, Sonja

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Henna Pirskanen, Kimmo Jokinen, Kati Kallinen, Minna Harju-Veijola, Sonja Rautakorpi
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Researching Children's Multiple Family Relations: Social Network Maps and Life-Lines as Methods

Abstract   Visual methods are reported to have certain advantages when conducting interviews on sensitive topics, such as intimate spaces, home-related ethical issues, and vulnerable families. In this article, we concentrate on two visual methods: social network maps and life-lines. In our research project on children's well-being and emotional security in multiple family relations, we collected data by interviewing children and asking them to complete social network maps and life-lines. We discuss the suitability of these two visual methods for describing children's close relationships with their family members and significant others. Combining these two methods during an interview process with children has not very often been tested. It is thus argued that these particular methods help a child to explain his or her family relations and life events. For the researcher interested in studying challenging and complex family relations, they can be extremely useful tools.

Keywords   Family Relations; Children; Life-Line Method; Social Network Maps; Visual Methods; Sensitive Issues

Henna Pirskanen, Ph.D., is a senior researcher in the National Institute for Health and Welfare (Finland) and in the Family Research Center, University of Jyväskylä. She currently works in the *Growing Up in the Finnish Alcohol Culture* project. Pirskanen's scientific publications put an emphasis on the ethics and methodologies of research on challenging family relations. Her doctoral dissertation (2011) concerned sons' experiences in families with a problem-drinking father. She worked in the Academy of Finland-funded EMSE project (2010-2013). She has coordinated the Doctoral Program for Family Studies since 2010.
email address: Henna.Pirskanen@jyu.fi

Kimmo Jokinen is a Professor of Family Studies and Head of the Family Research Center at the University of Jyväskylä. His research interests have focused on childhood, youth, and media, families, and family transitions, in particular on complex and challenging family relations and the well-being of families. He is the Director of the national Doctoral Program for Family Studies (funded by the Academy of Finland) and President of the European Society on Family Relations. Professor Jokinen was the Head of the EMSE project, and also participated in the EU project Family Platform.
email address: kimmo.j.jokinen@jyu.fi

Kati Kallinen (née Hämäläinen), Ph.D., is a post-doctoral researcher in the Family Research Center, University of Jyväskylä. Her doctoral dissertation (2012) investigated foster children's views on their home and family relations. Her research interests lie in foster children's perspectives on their lives, foster children's sibling relations, kinship care, and sensitive research issues. She has been involved in the EMSE project and has started her own post-doctoral research about foster children's sibling relations and their experience regarding kinship care.
email address: kati.p.kallinen@jyu.fi

Minna Harju-Veijola, M.Ed., is preparing her dissertation in education on boys' family relations. Her research interests include family interactions and children's sense of security.
email address: Minna.Harju-Veijola@ouka.fi

Sonja Rautakorpi, M.Soc.Sc., is a Ph.D. candidate in social work in the Family Research Center, University of Jyväskylä. She is preparing her doctoral dissertation on mother-child relationships in challenging family situations. She is currently working as a social worker in family counseling.
email address: sonja.rautakorpi@lempaala.fi

The use of visual methods is a long-standing tradition in social science research. As Jacqui Gabb (2008) has suggested, family research can also benefit from various different visual techniques. Photographs, diagrams, and drawings, in particular, have been used to prompt and elaborate stories and memories (Pink 2004; Mason 2007; Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis 2011; see also: Brannen, Heptinstall, and Bhopal 2000; Punch 2002a; Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller 2005; Konecki 2009). Visual methods are said to possess certain advantages, whether used alone or together with interviews, when addressing sensitive topics, such as intimate spaces, home-related ethical issues, and vulnerable families. When children are the focus of research, asking them to draw pictures or diagrams may be helpful when, for example, language limitations hinder them from expressing themselves adequately by word of mouth. Past and present experiences that cannot easily be articulated through language alone may find expression when visual and creative methods are combined with speech (Parry, Thomson, and Fowkes 1999; Darbyshire et al. 2005; Veale 2005; Wilson et al. 2007; Sheridan et al. 2011; see also: Phelan and Kinsella 2013).

In this article, we concentrate on two methodological tools: social network maps and life-lines. In our research project on children's well-being and emotional security in multiple family relations, we collected data by interviewing children and asking them to complete social network maps and life-lines. The purpose of social network maps is to capture children's family and other important relationships, with particular interest in how they define their family. In different studies, network maps with varying architectures have been used. In our study, we used maps that were divided into three sectors (family, relatives, and other important people) and three zones (closest, close, and remote), the child being in the middle of the map (see: Figure 1, p. 58). We asked children to freely add people important to them on the map. By using life-lines, we aimed at gathering information on the child's life history, in particular important transitions and events in the child's life. The life-line comprised both a horizontal line, which represented the whole life course from birth to the present day, and a vertical line, which represented the mood, positive or negative, connected to different life events (see: Figure 2, p. 61). The child marked the most significant events on the line and evaluated them.

The visual material collected in this study was thus produced by children in collaboration with the researchers. In this article, we both describe and reflect on our research experiences and discuss the suitability of these two visual methods for analyzing children's close relationships with their family members and significant others. We argue that by using and combining the two techniques, which are both visual and creative (Greene and Hill 2005; Veale 2005), with child interviews, a researcher stands to gain rewarding insights into children's perceptions and experiences of their lives and families. Combining these two methods during an interview process with children has not very often been tested: one of the few research efforts to utilize them simultaneously with other participatory methods is the Timescapes project (see, e.g., Weller and Edwards 2011).

Our purpose is to demonstrate that using visual methods and a mixed-method approach offers several advantages in collecting and analyzing qualitative data. First, visual methods furnish useful background information for the interviews; second, they provide rich independent data, a kind of visual architecture that is easy to analyze in itself; third, some children express themselves better by drawing and others by talking, hence combining these two modes can be expected to give better insights into children's experiences; fourth, as we discuss below, the specific social network map used in our study shows the multiple ways in which children understand the difference between their family and relatives, information which interviews alone would be unlikely to elicit; and fifth, the life-line method enables the incorporation of some of the advantag-

es of a qualitative longitudinal study in a research setting where it is not possible to follow children's lives for a longer period of time. Moreover, because we used social network maps and life-lines in an ethically sensitive research setting in which the participants' trust is of crucial importance, throughout the course of the article we raise ethical questions and highlight some of the challenges such a setting poses to researchers.

Background of the Study

The research data on using social network maps and life-lines referred to in this article concerns the research project on children's well-being and emotional security in multiple family relations. The project is multidisciplinary as it employs researchers from sociology, social work, education and psychology, and draws upon the theories and concepts used by these disciplines. The different disciplines complement each other in the project; for example, psychology and education give us insights into, for instance, emotions in families and into a child's development, including understanding of a key concept in our research, *emotional security*. Sociology and social work, in turn, help to reveal the meanings of family relationships and networks, and wider societal perspectives with regard to the structures and institutions that families and children are part of. The project was funded by the Academy of Finland (2010-2013).

The concept of *emotional security* refers to a child's social relationships, feelings, appraisals of trust, and sense of security in the context of family life. According to previous studies, emotional security

is an important link between the family environment, children's well-being, and child behavior problems (Cummings and Davies 1995; Davies and Cummings 1998; Davies, Winter, and Cicchetti 2006). The project at hand focuses in particular on children's personal understandings and emotions regarding their family relations and the challenges children face as a consequence of these relations (Andersson 2005; 2009; Holtan 2008; Pösö 2008). Therefore, we talk about *multiple* family relations. In the project, we interviewed children in different but often intertwined family situations: children living in foster families, who experience relationships with both biological and foster family members; children who have experienced physical or emotional violence, or have witnessed substance abuse within the family; children who have experienced parental divorce or separation and, as a result, come to experience residential and non-residential family relations; and children living in so-called nuclear families. These family relations cover the wide range of family situations that most children live in, including challenging and problematic ones. Family studies have been criticized for concentrating too much on the nuclear family or on the so-called proper family (Smith 1993; see also: Pösö 2008), and hence our purpose was to avoid an approach limited in this way.

Regardless of what type of family they live in, children experience multiple relations and connections that signify different things to them and offer different meanings. Some of these family relations are present in their daily lives, while others might only exist as memories or emotions. Many children have experiences of loss, separation, and anxiety deriv-

ing from their family relations, including events such as divorce of parents or grandparents or complex relationships with step-fathers or step-siblings. To be able to capture the multiple and challenging characteristics of a child's family relations, the use of innovative and versatile research methods is required. Family relations are emotionally laden and can import negative and positive effects and emotions into a child's life, the ones that are difficult for children to talk about. This is another reason for applying several research methods.

According to the contemporary sociology of childhood, it is important to provide children with the possibility to express their personal interpretations and thoughts, and to treat children as subjects instead of objects of the research (Eder and Fingerson 2002; Greene and Hogan 2005; see also: Roberts 2000; Ajodhia-Andrews and Berman 2009). Child and parent may view family relations very differently (Smart 2002). Our project is concerned, in particular, with capturing the child's perspective. In fact, children may sometimes comprehend complicated family relations differently from adults, and they can be very creative in defining who belongs to their family (Mason and Tipper 2008). However, researchers cannot ignore the fact that children need protection from adults, even when they are considered social actors (Eriksson and Näsman 2010).

Our interest in family relations also derives from awareness that family forms have changed considerably across the Western world. As Jokinen and Kuronen (2011) have stated on the basis of European comparative family studies, the most well-known

changes in family life include an increasing divorce and reconstitution rate, and an increasing number of children living outside their birth families (see also: Amato 2000; 2010). These changes have brought a need for studies from the child's point of view (Jokinen and Kuronen 2011). Families remain a child's most important growth environment and most significant source of emotional security and well-being. This applies to all families, biological and other.

The data gathered for the project on children's well-being and emotional security in multiple family relations consists of mobile phone-based diaries, thematic interviews, social network maps, and life-lines collected from a total of 64 children aged 7-15. Children at this age, while competent enough to take part in our study, are still to be considered "children." We were unable to include children under school age in our study since the use of mobile phone-based diaries requires them to be able to write fluently. Moreover, as Eriksson and Näsman (2010) state, school-aged children probably have more experience regarding interactions between children and adults outside the family than younger children, and are also more experienced in producing knowledge.

The data collection process began in two elementary schools, where the children were mainly living in nuclear families, single parent families, or reconstituted families. The schools recruited to the study were the ones that the researchers already had contact with, and located within a reasonable distance for interview purposes. This "familiarity" sped up the research process, as we were able to

implement the data collection almost immediately instead of trying to start the process from scratch. In the Finnish school system, there are generally no substantial differences between schools, either geographically or otherwise, and the schools participating in the study were "ordinary" primary schools. Other children, such as children living in foster families, or who had experienced or witnessed violence or substance abuse, were recruited to the study via appropriate child protection or domestic violence-related institutions and NGOs, such as Save the Children.

The research questions addressed by the project at hand were: (1) How do children develop and maintain degrees of emotional security in complex family situations? (2) What factors (e.g., the quality of social networks, roles of significant others, etc.) contribute to or hinder a child's emotional security in complex family situations? (3) How do children define and maintain their family relations in challenging life situations?

This article focuses on the social network maps and life-lines drawn by children for the purposes of our project. 64 children participated in the diary data collection, 41 of these children filled-in social network maps and life-lines, and we had permission to conduct interviews with 35 of them. We also asked for the consent of the children's parents and interviewed some of them. The data referred to in this article thus consists of network maps and life-lines collected from 41 children. Several methods were used to analyze the different data obtained during the study. In the analysis of social network maps and life-lines, thematic content

analysis and thematic category analysis were utilized. In the analysis of social network maps, we were interested in how the children understand their family: who belongs to it, how the children would group and arrange people on the map, how close people on the map were to the children, and whether these people were biological family members. In the analysis of life-lines, important events in the children's life-lines were categorized into thematic categories. Unfortunately, the substantive results of the analysis can only briefly be touched in this article; however, they are presented in other publications (see, e.g., Jokinen et al. 2013; Jallinoja, Hurme, and Jokinen 2014).

Ethical Starting Points

We recognize that it is not necessarily an easy task to give a voice to children living in challenging family relations and, consequently, that multiple methods may be required to achieve this goal. Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic, ethical considerations must be borne in mind at all times when doing research on family relations (Warin 2011; Phelan and Kinsella 2013). Such relations usually involve personal secrets. In some studies, it has been stated that children are particularly prone to keeping secrets, as they want to remain loyal to their parents (Pösö 2008; see also: Hurtig 2006; Smart 2007; see, e.g., McNay 2009 on family secrets). Clearly, loyalty towards family can be argued to be a characteristic of family members of any age; however, in the case of children, it has particular significance owing to children's dependency on adults. For example, some of the children in our study who had experienced their parents'

divorce spoke honestly about it, while others did not mention it at all.

In our study, parents who were willing to participate alongside their children were also interviewed and asked to complete their own social network maps from the child's point of view. This approach raised ethical concerns about whether children or parents would feel obliged—against their will—to reveal certain information about their lives (Heath et al. 2009). For example, in the interview situation, a child might expect a parent to reveal details about their family life, such as arguments in the family, that he or she might not otherwise wish to be unveiled. Hence, a child might also talk about the issue at hand, albeit reluctantly. There was also an additional problem—that participants might be curious to know what other members of the family had told the interviewer. It was our duty as researchers not to disclose to other family members what a parent or a child had said. Carol Smart (2007) argues that it can be difficult to get people to talk about their negative feelings towards members of their own family, especially in an ongoing situation. This poses a challenge for research delving into problematic family relations and provides the underlying rationale for developing new data collection methods.

One priority of an ethically responsible approach was to avoid causing harm or distress to the participants. Therefore, we felt the need to ensure that children were receiving professional help and/or had access to a help system during the research process. While this applied, in particular, to children living in difficult family situations and

reached via NGOs, we also wanted to ascertain that children recruited via schools would receive help if the interviews were to reveal worrying situations in their families. The organizations we co-operated with were Finnish NGOs working with adults and children on the issues of foster care, family violence, and substance abuse treatment. These organizations selected potential informants from their clients and employed an ethically focused selection criterion: the family situation had to be relatively stable. This meant, for example, that actions relating to foster care needed to have been taken a relatively long time before the data collection began. The social workers in the organizations knew their clients well enough to evaluate whether their life situation was such that participation in the study would cause them no harm or danger, and that, if needed, they could also provide help and counseling if the interviews were to bring back feelings and memories a client needed to discuss. It is noteworthy that the project was granted ethical approval by the ethics committee of the researchers' university (see: Jokinen et al. 2013).

Owing to the sensitivity of certain issues related to the research subject, careful consideration was also given to several other ethical and child-specific questions. For example, during the data collection, it was highly important that the children understood the purpose of the study (see: Cree, Kay, and Tisdall 2002; Pösö 2004; Mason 2007; Ryen 2011), and to bear in mind that although children may be capable of understanding the nature of the work being done, their lack of life experience may hinder their ability to comprehend its consequences. This is not, of course, to say that participation

in a study may not sometimes be difficult for adults as well (Mishna, Antle, and Regehr 2004; Helavirta 2006). As these kinds of ethical questions and challenges are discussed by the present research group elsewhere (Notko et al. 2013), they will not be considered any further in this article.

Visual Methods for Capturing Children's Family Relations

Mixed methods designed for children were used during the data collection. These methods aim at being "child-friendly," or "research-friendly." This approach reflects changes in the understanding of childhood that have taken place over the past few decades, one of which is the emphasis on a child's agency during research. In studies with child participants, there seems to be a growing desire to develop new "fun" and child-friendly methods. It is also important that such methods are participatory and creative in nature (Punch 2002a; 2002b; Veale 2005; White and Bushkin 2011).

Samantha Punch (2002b) has stated that the challenge lies not in patronizing children during research, but in recognizing their competencies, namely, by letting them enjoy being involved in the project and letting them communicate. A combination of techniques can make the interview process more fun and interesting for child participants.

However, the main purpose of using multiple techniques in our study was not just to develop "fun" methods but also to generate useful, relevant data. Using participatory techniques helps, for example, overcoming obstacles pertaining to a child's possi-

ble lack of confidence when addressing adults because of lack of experience of being treated as an equal by adults. It might also be the case that younger children are less able to concentrate. Bringing visual methods into the interview may make it easier to help them maintain their concentration. However, adults should not presume that this is necessarily the case for all children, as children are not all the same. Nevertheless, developmental factors are undoubtedly important in the choice of methodology (Punch 2002b; Greene and Hill 2005; Veale 2005).

During the present thematic interviews, social network maps and life-lines were used as visual methods. Because we had used social network maps and life-lines separately—but not simultaneously—in our earlier individual studies, and noted their suitability for family research, in this project, we were interested in seeing what benefits might emerge from combining them. Of course, other visual methods, just as good as the ones used in our project, are available for use in studies with children, such as the photograph method (Punch 2002b; Barker and Weller 2003; Darbyshire et al. 2005; Phelan and Kinsella 2013). For our purposes, however, no additional methods were needed, as the two visual methods complemented the thematic interviews. We also felt that, from the resource perspective, the use of more methods in this particular project was not justified. The chosen methods were considered sufficient to yield visual information on the research topic, that is, children's family relations and important life events. In choosing our visual methodology, we were keen to explore not only the content of both the maps and life-lines but also the spatial organization of the social network maps (see: Rose 2001).

Using Social Network Maps to Study Children

The social network map used in our study comprised three concentric zones: closest, close, and remote. Along with these zones, the map was also divided into three sectors, one for each of the child's family, relatives, and other important people, such as friends. The children located their family members and others in these sectors according to the level of intimacy they felt towards the person. It is noteworthy that while such maps have been used in other social science studies, their architecture has tended to vary. For example, Julia Brannen, Ellen Heptinstall, and Kalwant Bhopal (2000) divided their network map into three zones and four domains: household, relatives, friends, and formal others. Carol Smart, Bren Neale, and Amanda Wade (2001) used, in turn, a three-zone map, which was divided into just two sectors: family and friends. There are also methods that resemble our approach to network maps, such as the family network method, employed by, for example, Eric Widmer (2006). In addition, Kati Hämäläinen (2012) used a social network map in the shape of an apple tree in her study on foster children.

Thus, the shape of the map can vary in form from more simple to a more sophisticated; the role of the architecture of the map, that is, whether its visual image affects how children fill-in and understand the map, is a question that merits closer investigation. For example, does a simple map give children more freedom and hence prompt them to fill it in more on their own terms than a sophisticated map, or, does a map with a more sophisticated and

detailed architecture better assist children to focus on and ponder the topic of the study than a simple map? These are questions that remain unanswered here.

At the beginning of the interview session, children were asked to indicate on their social network maps people who were most important to them (see: Figure 1 below). The interview did not continue until the maps had been completed. If necessary, during the course of the interview, children were able to add new names to the map:

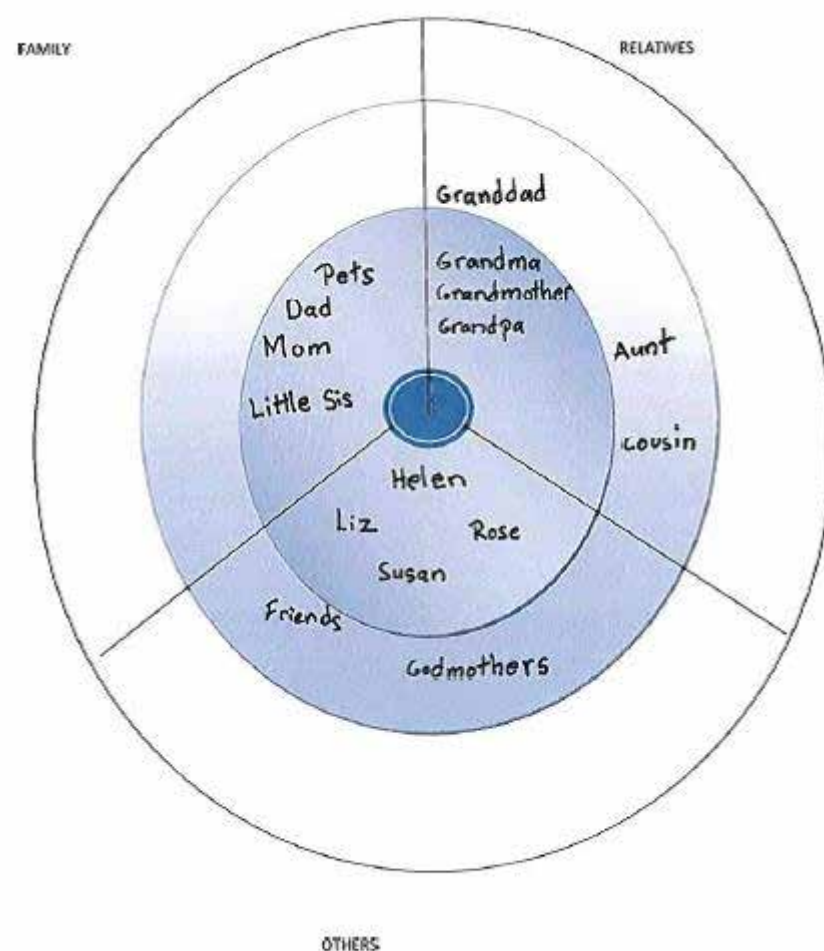> Child: Hmm. Can I still add [something] there?
> Interviewer: Yes, you can. You can, of course.
> Child: I'll write godmother.
> Interviewer: Right, that already came up in your talk. You can add [names] there, yes. [Interview 6]

Figure 1. Social network map drawn by an 11-year-old.[1]

Our experience suggests that filling-in a social network map as the first phase of engagement during an interview has certain benefits, the most notable being that the map acts as an "icebreaker" between interviewer and interviewee (child). Drawing or illustrating makes the interview process less authoritative. If the child felt a bit shy, he or she was not required to look directly at the interviewer immediately. Instead, the child had an opportunity to muster the courage to talk while marking people on the map. According to Punch (2002b), the use of task-based methods puts children at ease. In our study, most of the children were keen on using visual methods, whereas a small minority preferred not to use them and appeared to be more at ease talking (see also: Darbyshire et al. 2005). Nevertheless, when needed, visual methods like social network maps and life-lines can serve as a distraction for interviewees who are shy or anxious about being interviewed. The visual graph also becomes the third—and active—player in the interview process since it draws attention to itself and away from uneasy children (Veale 2005; Sheridan et al. 2011). The social network map also facilitates the transition towards asking the actual questions.

Elizabeth Silva and Carol Smart (1999) write that it is a common methodological practice in research on families and childhood to ask respondents to draw maps that would describe their families, or to locate their family members within a set of concentric circles. Identifying family members and friends in these ways is understood to reflect the subjective meanings of family relations. In some instances, the maps drawn may be far from an idealized or "standardized" portrayal of the family and its members. This would therefore disrupt the taken-for-granted assumption about blood and marital relationships. Stretching the concept of family might, in fact, erase clear-cut boundaries. Brannen and her colleagues (2000) report that children do not necessarily find it problematic to describe complexities associated with family relations. In their study, children were articulate and it were more commonly the researchers who struggled to make sense of family circumstances. These notions echo our experiences with social network maps, confirming their value as tools for research. Another research advantage that we noted is that one can discern at a glance, or at least begin to perceive, a child's social relations from their impressionistic network maps. In contrast, the interview method cannot offer such a quick and concrete outline.

Examination of the data collected from social network maps in our study revealed that although most family members were placed in the "closest" zone, some were not. An argument and/or a remote relationship with a family member, whether a sibling, a father, or a mother, was a reason to locate them in a zone outside the "closest." Mothers, however, were marked as "closest" more often than other family members.

> Interviewer: So you marked your mother as your closest family member. Why do you feel that she's the closest?
> Child: Well, I like to tell things to mum and that.
> Interviewer: Mhm, yeah. And then your big brother is the one you placed furthest away?
> Child: Well, we don't sort of talk much or we do argue and stuff, but we are pretty much in agreement with each other.
> Interviewer: And then your father and little sister are between your mother and your big brother.
> Child: Mhm.
> [Interview 7]

Network maps have often displayed almost parallel results, as many children tend to locate their significant others in the inner circles (see: Brannen et al. 2000). Correspondingly in our study, for example, one boy replied when asked why he had placed his parents in the inner circle: "I don't know. They are my parents."

However, not all of the children in our study conventionally located their biological parents in the inner circle of the map. Some other studies also have shown that children's idea of a family can be very flexible. According to Brannen and her colleagues (2000), children rarely refer to a "proper family" when answering questions about their significant others; neither do they often use this term when referring to their own families. By the term "proper family" we understand here conventional ways of seeing a family, that is, as a nuclear family composed of a mother, father, and their biological children. We have also noted above that although it might be considered that placing parents in the "closest" zone is an idealized way of configuring the family, this does not mean that the family is "proper" as such. Children also placed grandparents, pets, and adult siblings' children, and, in some instances, a brother's wife, a step-sibling, and a step-grandfather in the "closest" zone, which indicates that they had not necessarily filled in their maps according to social expectations regarding what constitutes a "proper family." For example, one child marked pets in the closest zone with other family members (see also: Charles and Davies 2008 on pets as part of people's kinship networks):

Interviewer: Does anybody else belong to your family in addition to your mum, dad, and little sister?
Child: No. Except our pets [belong too]. [Interview 11]

In addition, children did not hesitate to place family members they did not have a close relationship with in zones other than the "closest" on the network map. One child, a girl whose parents are divorced and who lives with her mother and sees her father every other week, explained in the interview: "I put also my father here [in zone two], he is at least a little bit." Another girl, who meets her father only rarely, told us: "My father, well, okay, he belongs to my family. However, I put him over there [in zone three] because he is, in a way, not in my family. Either at Christmas or during the summer or autumn holidays we meet each other. But, otherwise, he's not…"

Furthermore, children who had gained new family members when their parents had remarried or repartnered after divorce, and children who had biological parents and foster parents, had two families to mark on the map. The children's perceptions of people closest to them could thus also vary, and—occasionally—a parent was marked as "remote." In the case of foster children, the most secure and closely connected family relations might be, in particular, between children and non-biological family members. Similar results have also been obtained in other studies (see, e.g., Mason and Tipper 2008; Castrén 2009).

As an example of the variety of family configurations, one child, who—in addition to his biological parents—had a step-mother, a step-father, and a step-sibling, placed the step-sibling in the "closest" zone with his biological family, and his step-father and step-mother in the "close" zone. He pondered about placing his step-sibling nearer than his step-parents:

Child: And then my dad's wife's child, she's in a way also counted in [the family]… [Interview 6]

Importantly, all of the children had family members who were considered to be close and important to them, and were accordingly placed in the "closest" zone. Moreover, the fact that a child might start by filling-in maps that conform to the idealized view of the family could also reflect the child's desire for family relations of precisely that kind.

Life-Lines in the Study

Similarly, during the later stage of the interviews, children were asked to draw a line and mark significant events relating to their families on it. Because our aim was to trace changes, continuity, and breaks in family relations, the life-line method enabled us to trace temporality, which ranged from larger entities to small details. The horizontal axis represented time from a child's birth to the present day, and dots marked on the life-line referred to their age. As in the study by Joanna Sheridan and her research group (2011), the act of drawing life-lines could be a co-constructed effort between researcher and child. Children marked significant events on the life-line that related to their family, and wrote down what each of them expressed. The researcher worked as an aide during the process, asking questions when needed about the child's life. Thus, in much the same way as working with network maps, the researcher was able to point to marks on the graph and ask the child, "Tell me about this," or "What happened here?," or "Why did you draw this here?" It is also noteworthy that, with this method, children can more easily express events relating to different contours of time, such as historical, cyclical, and, perhaps most significantly, personal time. This emphasizes children's personal experiences with the concept of time and its effects on family relations (see: Sheridan et al. 2011).

Figure 2. Life-line made by an 11-year-old. Translated (with details altered).
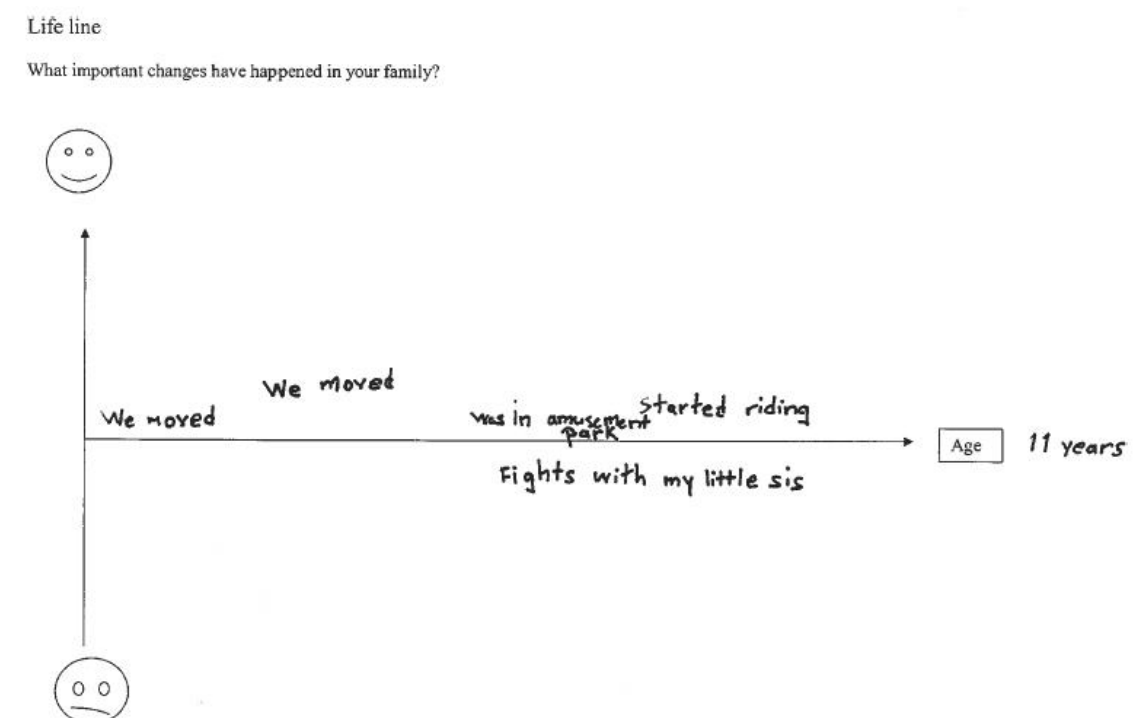
Karen Davies (1996) notes that the life-line method can be useful when trying to explain the complexity of an individual's life. In our view, for the very same reason, it also helps to capture a child's life, including family relations and emotional experiences. Research often captures time as a snapshot of the child's present life (see: Greene and Hill 2005). Our more ambitious aim was to gain an insight into children's pasts and futures as well. Another method well-suited for studying temporal dimensions in children's lives is, of course, qualitative longitudinal research (see, e.g., Thomson et al. 2004). Whilst we did not have a possibility to carry out longitudinal research within the project's time and resource framework, using the life-line method worked well for our purposes.

Allen White and Naomi Bushkin (2011) used life-line exercises, along with a wide range of methods, in their study on asylum-seeking children, whose lives are often full of complexities. What made the life-line technique so suitable for our study was that it positioned children's lives along a chronological line while representing time as *relational* instead of individual. This means that separate events and time as a whole should be seen in relation to the child's, the child's family members', and significant others' times (Davies 1996). Life-lines can also be seen as a memory aid for children in the sense that they act as a trigger for remembering the various events and experiences that have taken place during the totality of a person's life. Life-lines depict events quickly and effectively in a graphic format. Children may have plenty of events to mark on the line, and in these cases, for the interviewer, the graphic form

also is very welcome for reasons of clarity. Here, a child explains events on his life-line:

> Child: When I was 3, my dad and mum separated. And when I was probably 5, my little sister was born.
> Interviewer: That was a happy event?
> Child: Hmm. Except…if anybody else held her, I would scream and shout that nobody else but me can hold her…so jealous! … And I remember I was so excited about school starting, I was 7…I'll write that above there because I've run out of space. And there, that's my rabbit. There, I write that I got him. And then he died. And that is a bit blurred, but there I went to kindergarten and I got my first friend.
> Interviewer: And your grandma has died? Do you remember a lot about your grandma?
> Child: No, I just remember that, that we visited her, you see, she got this serious illness…and she used to wave like this…
> Interviewer: But, it's nice that you have those memories, although you were quite little back then. And then your dad died?
> Child: Yeah…and now our house is empty [the house is being sold]…it was our home, you see.
> [Interview 32]

As one can imagine on the basis of the extract, even though some events have been excluded to protect anonymity, the life-line corresponding to the events that the child has described during the interview added clarity to the order of events. It also assisted the child to recall feelings attached to the events, both happy and sad. On the other hand, two children in our study left the life-line blank. As already mentioned, we emphasized the

voluntary nature of participation to the children, for example, that they did not have to answer every question. Sometimes the children took advantage of this possibility, as these blank life-lines show. Because the number of blank lines was only two, it did not present problems for the data analysis. Pirskanen (2009) also noted in her study on men who have had problem-drinking fathers that not all individuals feel at ease filling in a life-line since they find it difficult to express time and events in a graphic form.

At the same time as a life-line encourages participants to tell their stories, it acts as data in its own rights, since its value goes beyond merely plotting and recording life events (Davies 1996; Sheridan et al. 2011). In their study on obesity and weight loss, Sheridan and her colleagues (2011) exemplify how time-lining serves as a subtle and reflexive research method. In our study, life-lines opened up a rich view on how children perceive time and temporality and how children's memories and family histories are mingled in these perceptions.

One intriguing feature of life-lines as a research method, however, is their ability to reveal life events and family matters while simultaneously concealing or disguising them (Sheridan et al. 2011). Participants have the potential to leave significant events unmarked if they feel that these are something they do not wish to share with interviewers. They also might seek to draw attention to a particular event in the hope of taking it away from another event of a more sensitive kind. However, in our research, we did not find this a problem. We wanted to respect the child's freedom of choice in

labeling family events as significant, as well as to refrain from obliging them to speak about sensitive issues that were too difficult. In general, respecting interviewees' choices on the topics they are willing or unwilling to talk about concerns not only studies on children but all research, especially when the topics can be considered sensitive or private. Our view is that in these cases, the ethical nature of research is primary, even if it means that the knowledge gained during the study is not as "complete" as it ideally could be. Comparison of children's and their parents' interviews also revealed that some children who had experienced violence or substance abuse in the family did not mark these experiences on the life-line. One possible interpretation of this, in addition to the sensitivity of the topic, is that events of long duration (e.g., an alcohol problem that extends over several years) are not necessarily easy for children to locate in a temporal line. Here, again, we emphasize the advantages of using multiple methods to obtain as rich a dataset as possible, as the different methods complement each other also with respect to "missing" information. In addition, the use of life-lines gave us rich and detailed information on most of the children's important experiences and transitions.

To summarize, it is easier to learn about how children—and also adults—analyze their world when they are given adequate space to talk about it (Alasuutari 2005). As our research suggests, visual methods offer children a space for explaining and describing their family relations in the course of being interviewed. It has been said that qualitative research generally provides an opportunity to tap

the richness of a child's thoughts. Through such methods we are able to step outside the bounds of adult thinking and discover unexpected differences between the perceptions of adults and those of children (Mishna et al. 2004). It might be that children are used to trying to please adults, sometimes fearing an adult's reaction. It is therefore important to create an atmosphere of confidentiality when working with children (Punch 2002b). In our opinion, visual methods emphasize not only a child's agency but they also expressly create an atmosphere in which children do not need to worry about giving the "right" answers.

> Interviewer: You can mark in the closest zone people you feel are the closest to you.
>
> [The child writes].
>
> Child: Can I put two?
>
> Interviewer: You can put as many names as you want.
>
> Child: And, can I mark pets, too?
>
> Interviewer: Yes, you can. These maps can look very different. There are no right or wrong answers, but your own experiences are important, as is the case with all the questions.
>
> Child: These are all [members] we have in our family. [The child shows completed map].
>
> [Interview 21]

Thus, children are allowed to be experts on a topic of interest to them: their family. Naturally, it must be borne in mind that research participants may respond differently to different research methods (Brannen et al. 2000), and, as we have stated before, using a mixed-methods approach is a good way of handling this problem.

Discussion

This article describes and evaluates the use of specific visual methods in our research on family relations. Both social network maps and the life-line method were used in a study where children were interviewed. Sheridan and her colleagues (2011) argue, in the light of their own research and other social studies, that qualitative research generally relies on talk, but that talk can be assisted and supported by visual means. Our experiences with the use of social network maps and the life-line method when interviewing children about their family relations strongly support this argument. These particular methods help a child to effectively explain his or her family relations and life events, especially when compared to merely speaking about them during the interviews. Therefore, visual methods support the interviews, help the interviewer to follow the child's story, and give a versatile picture of the child's social world. Moreover, these methods are participatory, and the child is invited to actively join in the interviewing process by illustrating, as well as talking about their perceptions. In other words, our experience shows that offering children multiple channels to express themselves enhances their active participation. During the research process, it became clear that some children expressed themselves better by talking and others by drawing. During the interview process, the children often referred back to their social network maps and life-lines in order to supplement them with further details. The interviewers were also able to spot things on a map which the child has not talked about, then to point to these things, and ask the child about them. All of the above indicates that visual methods encourage children to remember and talk about issues related to their families.

We also took cognizance of the criticism that using a social network map might cause children to draw maps of an idealized family. In other words, children might locate their family members on a map in such a way as to make them appear socially desirable. However, this did not appear to be the case in our study. For example, most of the children who had experienced parental divorce did not think there was such thing as normal, perfect, and proper family. Very few of them referred to the standard or idealized nuclear family stereotype of a father, mother, and their biological children. In the case of life-lines, children might leave out events that they do not want to reveal to researchers. However, as part of an ethical research process, we sought to respect their right to do so and not to probe excessively into possibly painful memories. Hence, despite their potential weaknesses, we consider the advantages of visual methods outweighing their possible disadvantages when researching family relations.

More importantly, richer data may be compiled by using a variety of methods. For example, a combination of the interview method and innovative techniques aimed at children enables a child's unique perception of his or her family to be brought into light (see: Punch 2002b). When combined, a variety of methods helps to produce a picture of children's day-to-day family relations, as well as significant family events from the past, which have impacted the course of their lives. These are the most explicit advantages of using a composite methodology. As a result, we are not solely limited to an understanding of children's family relations as they happen on a day-to-day basis, but we can also grasp the past and therefore understand the temporality of family relations, as understood by children.

These methods also assist us to form a comprehensive account of why and for what reasons a child's current family relations appear as they do from the child's perspective. With graphic assistance, we can see how family bonds evolve over time, grow in importance, remain stable, undergo ruptures, or even fade, as is sometimes the case. We argue that exploring temporality in a child's family life is an important key to understanding family relations, which is why the life-line method is of such value when it is not possible to implement a longitudinal research setting. Perhaps the most important benefit of using social network maps is, however, the potential to grasp a child's perception of his/her family relations in their entirety, as well as to see the commitments, loyalties, and bonds children share with the significant others in their lives. For example, our maps, where family members, relatives, and other important people had a sector of their own, offered interesting and important information on how children defined in many different and detailed ways who belonged to their family or was counted among their relatives. Our maps show that—from the

children's point of view—the boundary between family and relatives is fluid. Each of these visual methods is valuable as each differs in its scope while helping to capture experiences relating to the multiple dimensions of family life.

In addition, using task-based and creative visual methods can cause children to feel more comfortable in certain situations. This is relevant to our research topic since the discussions we had with children were often sensitive in nature (e.g., in the case of foster children). Both social network maps and life-lines help to reveal the complexity of family relations in many ways, even when the issues in question might be difficult for the child to cope with. Combining these methods enables children to contemplate and visualize their experiences. Hence, they offer a combination of reflexive methods that can be applied by researchers interested in children's family lives.

Using social network maps and life-lines assisted us in our efforts to capture some of the irregularities and similarities in family relations across family types, such as nuclear families, divorced families, foster homes, or families affected by violence or a parent's substance abuse. The results displayed greater diversity when relations in the family had gone through major change or adversity, as the children in these families reflected more on issues related to relationships and people close to them. In general, the children included happy and normal everyday events, such as birth of siblings, getting pets, or going on trips, but sometimes also illustrated their life-lines with difficult events, such

as family members' illnesses and deaths or arguments with family members. In other words, the life-lines displayed the complexities of family life in its entirety and showed how children's lives are relational—related to people important to them—in nature.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that combining visual methods when researching challenging and complex family relations can be extremely useful from the researcher's perspective. Our results indicate that by applying such methods, versatile knowledge on children's families can be gained. Combining visual methods also enables children's voices to be heard on the matters regarding their families. Because we used both interviews and visual methods, we venture to say that not all the information gained by using visual methods would have been gathered by interviews alone. In addition, for our analysis, the visual data, as independent data in its own rights, furnished very useful material in a compact form. The challenging task that researchers face when studying children on sensitive matters such as their family relations can thus be eased by utilizing and combining innovative visual methods.

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