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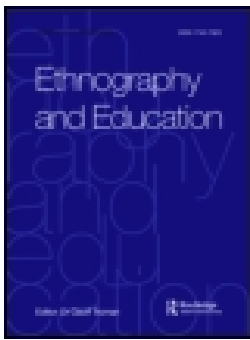**Year:** 2021

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Relational analysis and the ethnographic approach: constructing preschool childhood

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ABSTRACT

This article elaborates the relational ontology in an ethnographic study. The aim is to seek relational construction of preschool practice and how children's positions are constructed in it. The study is based on the understanding that ethnography and relational sociology share the idea that society emerges through repeated relations. The ontological thinking of relational sociology is applied in a micro-level analysis of three episodes from a Finnish preschool. We propose that relations appear in every single ethnographical episode and that carefully analysed repetitive relations can reveal a stabilised organisational structure. The analysis shows how the position of one child is structuring and being structured in everyday actions in a preschool. We argue that through relational analysis of ethnographic data, it is possible to seek sociological knowledge of institutions – in this case, of preschool.

Introduction

This methodological paper discusses the possibilities of elaborating the relational analysis of ethnographic data and shows the potential of ethnographic research to reveal the complexity of everyday life in early childhood education. Our aim is to seek relational construction of preschool practice, particularly the nuanced construction of preschool childhood. This aim is achieved by describing an analysis of ethnographic data that provides information on relations among children and between children and educators. We use the ontological ideas of relational sociology combined with a relational ethnography approach. As a result of the analysis of repeated interdependent relations, the positions of children and educators gradually arise, and they can stabilise and generate new social forms, which can then be reiterated or change over time (Donati 2015, 94–95).

The two foundational starting points of relational sociology – society is made by individuals in relations, and society can be activated only by individuals (Donati 2015) – conjoin relational sociology and ethnography. In illustrating (structural) relational ethnography, Burawoy (2017, 266, 282) demonstrates that ethnography is always relational. Ethnographic research occurs in an everyday context, with the researcher involved in

people's day-to-day lives and observing them (Atkinson et al. 2001, 4–5). The focus of the research is on local sites of social relations and cultural forms (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3; Atkinson 2015, 3–6), which are, according to relational ontology, the essential basic units of society (Donati 2015). The logic underlying relational thinking is compatible with ethnography, which focuses on what happens in a particular locale or social institution.

The relational approach is not a consistent theory, but fertile discussion and several theoretical schools of thought (Dépelteau 2018). The relational turn arose from a deep paradigm struggle between the concepts of social structure and agency (Emirbayer 1997; Mische 2011; Fuhse 2013), for example, whether an individual acts as a free agent or one directed by structure (Kaspersen and Gabriel 2013). As Emirbayer (1997, 281) stated, the dilemma is 'whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substance or in processes'. This is a question of social ontology that involves various types of theoretical schools and theories (for more detail, see O'Donnell 2010). Relational sociology is a theoretical trend that sees relations, as opposed to the dualism of structure and agency, as fundamentally constructing the social. In relational sociology, social phenomena are understood as processes constituted by the flow of relational action. It is through relations, then, that human beings become social actors. Although the key thinkers of relational sociology began from different ontological points, they all view society as comprising relations, social relationships, or networks among actors (Bourdieu 1990; Dépelteau 2008; Powell and Dépelteau 2013a; Burkitt 2015; Crossley 2015; Donati 2015; Prandini 2015). In our study, we chose to use ontological assumptions of relational sociology combined with analysis of ethnographic data.

As Prandini (2015, 3) states, interpersonal relations are the basic stuff of social processes in relational thinking. The basic question becomes what a relation is, what its ontology is and how to study it. For this study, we base our thinking on three assumptions that, according to the theoretical literature, are central to relational sociology. (1) The first assumption is fundamental for relational sociology: social action can be understood only as interdependent action. A relation can be interpersonal, such as a peer-group relation or the impersonal relation experienced at work or in other organisations. In relational thinking, the effect of social relations is power (Dépelteau 2008, 60; Burkitt 2015, 10, 13). Our study focuses on relations between children and educators in the pre-school context. (2) The second assumption of relational sociology we emphasise is that communication processes establish, reproduce and modify social relationships as meaningful social constructions (see Fuhse 2015b). Social networks arise from communication, and they structure future communication. Communication can be defined as observable micro-events, entwined with meaning, that occur between actors. In this process, networks and structures of expectations arise, stabilise and change. Over the course of communicating, social networks of expectations are continuously confirmed and modified. This requires that communicative events (like shaking hands) are allowed to carry meaning (Fuhse 2015b, 45–46, 55). In the examples of ethnographic analysis, we pay special attention to how communication processes modify the social relations and positions of children. (3) The third assumption of relational sociology we emphasise is that the peculiarity of social relationships varies with the setting. This leads to a view of society as a differentiation of social spaces, in which differentiation has a relational character both within social spaces and between them (Donati 2011).

Hence, it is both possible and important to study preschool as an institution in which childhood can be understood as being both constructed and constructing itself. This means conceptualising childhood as taking shape first in relational practices within which children co-construct themselves as children and, second, that childhood is culturally constructed within socially generated spaces (see Alanen 2012).

The preschool institution is composed of relations, referring here to reciprocal actions and communication between actors in the everyday practices within physical and social frameworks. Both educators and children are active actors in these processes. On the grounds of the three assumptions of relational sociology previously discussed, the researcher's gaze should focus on communication and relations. An analysis of action can reveal repetitive practices (Crossley 2011, 165–166, 179–180; Prandini 2015, 8) in which

> actors occupy 'positions' which are constituted both by their pattern of ties to others (a pattern which they may share with others in an equivalent class) and by the resources they have available to them and can make available, through exchange, to others. (Crossley 2011, 179–180)

These positions define not only the positions of actors, but possibilities for action. Together, positions and possibilities for action have an effect on an actor's social relations, on how they are formed. In a preschool context, childhood (and also adulthood) is simultaneously structuring and being structured in daily action.

These recent theoretical writings on relational sociology introduce our approach and the ontological thinking used in our analysis of ethnographic data. These ontological premises link our research to relational ethnography.

The debate over the 'true' nature of relational ethnography has, at times, taken on heated tones (Desmond 2014; Burawoy 2017). However, we utilise the idea that

> the relational approach incorporates fully into the ethnographic sample at least two types of actors or agencies occupying different positions within the social space and bound together in a relationship of mutual dependence or struggle. (Desmond 2014, 554)

This is how Desmond separates relational ethnography from other ethnographic approaches. Our research data meet these characteristics of relational ethnography. With our relational-based analysis of selected ethnographic data from a Finnish preschool we demonstrate how it is possible to generate sociological knowledge about preschool childhood and how children's positions are constructed in it. We show, with a gradual, cumulative micro-level analysis of everyday practices in preschool, how children's interdependent actions in relations affect their positions in the group. Consequently, it is possible to outline how new social structures can arise, stabilise or change over time.

Relational ontology and the ethnographic approach

Burawoy (2017, 282) calls for the elaboration of theoretical traditions and paradigms to be attached to ethnographic research. We do so by combining the ontological starting points of relational sociology with our ethnographic research. This directs our epistemological and methodological thinking and steers us to choose relations as a research object. According to relational sociology, we understand the concept of relation to have a double meaning as a process and as the outcome of a process in which the actors themselves are

formed (Prandini 2015, 7–8, 9). A relational perspective leads to the reconstruction of concepts such as the individual, structure, power, and society. These concepts must be redefined as relational concepts, implying they are constructed in a process (Kaspersen and Gabriel 2013). A relational explanation of society also emphasises that diverse properties are attached to relations, not to agents. The meaning of properties such as age and sex is always relationally constructed (Bourdieu 1990).

Social phenomena are understood as processes constituted by the flow of relational action. Human beings become social actors through relations. We, as well as relational sociologists, are interested in individuals in their relations and the structures of interconnection among actors. These structures would not remain if their individual elements in relations ceased to exist. The conclusion is clear: without relations, there would be no society (Crossley 2011, 166; Prandini 2015, 7–8, 9).

According to Donati (2013, 213), the emergence phenomenon (in our case, preschool childhood) is an 'act of composition (synthesis)' that combines hitherto separate elements into a new entity. Donati emphasises that such an entity presents properties and powers that cannot be reduced to the sum of the properties and powers of its constituent elements. In a relational structure, the basic elements, such as the subjects of a social relation, are combined in a new way. They cannot be explained based on their former properties and powers, because they belong to a new relation.

Thus, individuals give rise to social forms that do not depend on them, but are the products of their actions relative to other individuals in a given context (Donati 2015, 88). Relational society then emerges through repeated relations. Donati (2013, 205–206) calls it a morphogenetic process. In morphogenesis the emergent forms can be stabilised as structures of interactions between actors that operate for a certain span of time (Prandini 2015, 8).

According to Donati (2011), society is made up *by* individuals but is not made *of* individuals. Human beings always become social actors *within* and *through* interactions. These interactions or ties can be mediated by material objects and situated within material as well as organisational environments (affordances) that create both opportunities and constraints for the actors. Crossley remarks that, methodologically, we certainly should observe social phenomena at both the individual and contextual levels. Thus, we can contextualise phenomena in specific and lasting relations in which individuals are embedded (Crossley 2015, 66–67; Prandini 2015, 7). For more details about the different theoretical trends in relational sociology, see Fuhse (2015a) and Powell and Dépelteau (2013b).

The abovementioned ontological starting points of relational sociology serve as a strong bridge to ethnography and for elaborating on the relational analysis of ethnographic data. Ethnography is commonly understood as an exploration of people's ways of life and the determinants of sociocultural phenomena within the context people are living in. In data collection, ethnography involves researchers' participation in people's day-to-day lives. As Atkinson (2015, 13–19) states, 'social organisation and social action are at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise'. He warns against overlooking socially shared and culturally prescribed forms of experiences. Ethnographic data collection focuses on everyday life, which is physical and symbolic. This is the link between ethnography and relational sociology. The ethnographer observes the everyday relationships among individuals, 'by whom' society is made (Donati 2011, 60–62). However,

when choosing the concepts and analysis approach, an ethnographer should also consider the epistemological assumption of the research (Tavory and Timmermans 2009). With a long stay in the field and detailed notes, an ethnographer can identify deep problems and describe the types of social relation (i.e. actions) constructed, the influence of the material and physical environments (Crossley 2015, 66–67) as well as the influence of other elements in the contexts of relations. Ethnography draws explicit attention to the social and cultural context of life and highlights that the group is much more notable than the individuals involved in it. Social life cannot be reduced to individual qualities (Prus 2007, 686–688) and therefore relational ontology and relational analysis are important in ethnography.

Matthew Desmond (2014, 547) has developed the idea of relational ethnography, offering 'an ethnographic method that works with the relational and processual nature of social reality'. Desmond's ideas are based on the same ontology as relational sociology. He defines relational ethnography as 'processes involving configurations of relations among different actors or institutions' (Desmond 2014, 547). Desmond also highlights four guidelines for relational ethnographers to draw upon. He suggests studying 'fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people and cultural conflict rather than group culture' (Desmond 2014, 562). The relational approach guides the analytical gaze of the ethnographer in the field and in the analytical work. This does not mean a process of straightforward analysis. Rather, the ethnographer should have a good imagination and the courage to see new things. As Tavory (2016, 55) puts it, if researchers try to find something theoretically interesting, they develop their thinking over time, moving back and forth between data and multiple theories.

In sum, ethnography and relational sociology as a branch of science share a relational starting point. The main idea is that society and social forms and institutions are produced through the everyday action of individual actors and through their encounters, their relations. In turn, these social forms improve coordination and social balance in those relations and actions. In the next section, we describe in detail how one relational analysis is developed in and with the present data.

Method and data: principles of relational analysis

Setting and participants

The ethnographic fieldwork for this study took place in a Finnish preschool group and it involved participant observation and interviews with children and educators. We use the term *preschool* to refer to the study group of 21 children (aged 5–6 years), of which 20 children took part in the study. There were two preschool teachers, and one nursery nurse who worked with the group, which was run by the municipality. Compulsory school started for these children in the next academic year.

The group operated full-time (open from 6:30 am to 5:00 pm). Finnish preschool education involves planned and goal-oriented education, teaching and care, with an emphasis on pedagogy. The approach to learning should be thematic, and different content areas (language, mathematics, etc.) are integrated with play (National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2016). In this group, like in many other Finnish preschool

groups, the adult-planned pedagogical activity for the whole group or half group (depending on the demands of the activity) was focused on the mornings. In the afternoons, children had freedom to plan their own play activities, which educators supported.

Data collection was conducted by the second author. The data used were part of the research project Resources, Locality, and Life Course, funded by the Academy of Finland (2005–2009). All data were collected within the project's duration. For ethical reasons, the exact timing of the collection was not included. The original intention of the study from which these data were drawn was to explore children's participation and resources, and how children produce positions in a preschool group. The study applied a relational sociology approach to investigate action and interaction within the institutional context of education in Finland (see Vuorisalo 2013; Vuorisalo and Alanen 2015). In this article, we present some of these results while we describe how to apply relational starting points in analysing ethnographic data.

Fieldwork procedures

The fieldwork period consisted of 42 days in a preschool group during the course of an academic year from August to May. The field notes were taken while observing situations, and include descriptions of action and communication from the children's point of view. Mari focused on one child at a time and wrote detailed notes, starting from the child and extending the notes to include the communication processes and activities of the group. She also conducted interviews with 10 children individually on a voluntary basis, and interviewed the educators in a group. All the interviews were dated to the last days of the fieldwork and they mostly supplemented the data.

Mari had a minor role as a participant in the group's activities, but she was always receptive when children approached her and wanted to interact. The children got to know Mari, and her method of following children around with her notebook. Throughout the fieldwork, the children often came to her and asked what she had written. They also actively made suggestions about what she should have written and where she should have made her observations. Some children were more active in doing this, but all children interacted with her at some point. At these moments, Mari had an opportunity to create relations with children and to reflect on children's acceptance of the study and Mari's position as a participant in the group (see Corsaro and Molinari 2008).

Analytical strategies

The preschool data comprised mostly ethnographic field notes, but the interview data were audio recordings. Both types of data were transcribed and transformed into an electronic format. Participant observation generates considerable amounts of informal data through experiences in the field (Atkinson 2015; Delamont 2014). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) suggest that most ethnographers combine experiential and participating-to-write approaches in their fieldwork, where the former approach describes the immersion in the events in the field and the latter relates to the intent to write detailed notes about significant and interesting events (see also Wolfinger 2002). Our analysis also employs these informal data, experiences and understandings of the studied group. The core of the analysis focused on the field notes, and the analysis of the interview

material is not included in this article. However, interviewing the children and the educators was part of the lived experience in the field and working with the data inevitably has an impact on the production of the results and developing the analysis. The fieldwork as such formed a foundation for understanding relations and structures in this particular preschool group.

The relational analysis of the data combined different analytical procedures (theoretical notes, network analysis and quantification). The analysis proceeded from a general characterisation of the episodes to identifying children's and educators' strategies for constructing and sustaining relations and positions; that is, how they used their cultural and social resources and how power was distributed among positions (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Dépelteau 2008; Burkitt 2015). The analysis was especially focused on the children's actions. Initially, the content of actions and communication were described (what was happening and where, what the children and educators were doing), followed by reflection on the following questions: (1) What seems to be important for the participants in a particular episode? (2) What are the effects of interdependent action on the actors and the entire group? (3) What features in the everyday life of the group might clarify their actions? Through these questions, the relational processes occurring in episodes were identified.

Detailed analysis of each episode was conducted based on theoretical notes (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The aim of taking these notes was to think through each episode according to analytical questions (see the previous paragraph) and to rewrite the data as a relational process. Besides these notes, other analytical procedures included network analysis of each child's play networks in the preschool (with whom they played, and how often this relation appeared during the free play when children were free to choose their playmates), and quantification of activeness (how actively each child took part in teacher-guided situations either by initiating a discussion topic or by answering a teacher's question). All these procedures were applied to enhance relational understanding of the practices of interdependent action and of each child's position in the preschool's social space. The network analyses and quantifications condensed the data analytically and showed the repetitiveness of some relationships and practices, while the theoretical notes facilitated deeper interpretations of the interdependent action.

All these analyses were executed at the micro-level, and the focus was on relations at the individual level. However, the heart of the analysis was to recognise the repetitive situations that indicate the practices as structures of the social space (see Crossley 2011). As Fuhse (2015b) argues, communication processes produce and reproduce social relationships as meaningful social constructions. Thus, social relationships in particular settings have their own history. Children's positions in a preschool group are one indicator of this kind of process, where relationships find their way to be lived in a certain way time after time, and possibilities to participate are determined not according to the skills of the individuals but according to the relations and their attributes.

Petri: positions and structures in a preschool

For closer inquiry of the data, we selected one boy, here called Petri, whose relational processes, participation, interdependent action and position in the group highlight a few repetitive processes of preschool. By focusing on one child, we reveal different ways in

which his relations were produced and reproduced, and what kind of meaning communication carries for him in the social setting of the preschool. The following micro-analysis of three episodes and a wider description of the results represent Petri's position in the group, as well as outline the structural elements of this social space. Altogether, these findings deepen our understanding of childhood in educational institutions.

The following data extract describes a social setting involving Petri and other children of the group in a teacher-guided situation. The group has gathered for the morning circle, which usually starts the preschool day. Children sit in a circle, in assigned places on benches. The usual content of the circle is that they check the calendar, sing, discuss the daily programme and other topics, and do some small preschool activities. In this case, the letter *p* is under review.

Morning assembly

The teacher asks, 'Do we have any child in this group whose name starts with the letter p*?' Many children including Petri put their thumbs up [to indicate that they want to answer]. The teacher starts wondering aloud, 'Don't we have any child at the moment whose name starts with* p*?' After the teacher has repeated this a couple of times, Petri puts his thumb down. Other children mention Petri's name aloud. The teacher says, 'Of course, Petri. Sorry, I forgot. Didn't you remember yourself either?' Petri says nothing. The teacher asks if there is anybody else and the children call out Pasi's name, but he is absent that day.*

This morning circle occurs after eight months of preschool education, and the children are experienced with this kind of exercise. They are eager to answer, and Petri is also taking part. His raised thumb indicates that he wants to answer, and his own name starts with the letter *p*. However, Petri is not able to show his skill in this process.

The teacher muses on her own question, and it seems that she has a memory lapse regarding the children's names. When the teacher does not recognise Petri's attempt, he withdraws. The teacher confirms her obliviousness by saying 'Sorry, I forgot'. Even though she apologises for this action, the situation illustrates her relation to Petri. First, she does not notice him, and second, she supposes that Petri might not have known the spelling of his own name. No one, including Petri, corrects the teacher about the fact that he tried to answer. Petri does not say his answer aloud, which is what other children are doing. Other children's behaviour shows alternative ways to participate, but Petri does not use them. In turn, this indicates how Petri is taking part in this relation. The relational process in this situation is leading Petri to a position where he is not participating and not proficient to accomplish preschool exercises. In the whole data set, Petri's participation follows the same pattern many times, especially in guided situations, but also in some social settings with other children. The next episode, in which children are playing on the preschool's playground, reiterates and renews relational processes concerning Petri's position in the group and his way of participation.

Petri and the skipping rope

Petri has fetched a skipping rope from the storage shed. He is pulling it along the ground. He says, 'Look, this is a snake'. Venla and Laura grab the other end of the rope. Petri and the girls pull the rope in opposite directions. A teacher intervenes in the situation. Venla and

Laura say that the rope is theirs. The teacher orders Petri to give the rope to the girls. Petri hands over the rope. The girls take it with them. Venla: 'We got the snake'.

In this incident, the skipping rope is an important element, and relations arise via interactions regarding the rope. Petri is playing with it and his remark that the rope is a snake is not directed at anyone in particular. However, Venla and Laura hear it and grab the skipping rope. Petri is the first user of the skipping rope during this outdoor activity. One of the implied rules in this preschool is that the first user has the right to decide what to do with a toy. In this case, it is obvious that Petri should have the full right to continue playing with the rope.

The extract does not indicate whether the teacher saw or heard Petri's game. However, as her action demonstrates, it is the girls' account of the incident she uses when making the decision. She orders Petri to give the rope to the girls, and Petri obeys.

Venla's comment of 'We got the snake' denotes that the material retains its meaning: she gives the rope the same status that Petri did. It is apparent that the girls win the struggle over the skipping rope by unfairly using the group's rules, and nobody interferes. Another child might have defended themselves and stated that they were the first user of the toy, but Petri does not resist the girls or the teacher.

After an analysis of the whole data set, it was observed that in this preschool group there are, for Petri, social settings where the relational processes occur time after time in a similar way: Petri retreats from communication and appears as a non-participative member in his preschool group. From Petri's point of view, the skipping rope episode repeats the formations from the previous incident in the morning assembly. We argue that these situations indicate what is possible for Petri in certain social settings, and by analysing interdependent relations between situations, we may observe the children's positions and the underlying hierarchies emerge.

Petri complies with the girls' thinking and action about the skipping rope, although it is against his supposed interests. The same happened with the teacher in the morning assembly. In the skipping rope episode, Venla and Laura are able to find very different ways to act than Petri. First, Venla and Laura reckoned they could take the rope from Petri; second, they were able to explain to the teacher the situation in such a way that the teacher awarded them the rope. The embedded cultural knowledge of relations in the group guides children's actions, and the relations between positions enable different actions for different children (see Dépelteau 2008; Burkitt 2015). Thus, the communication shows children's positions and resources in this relational space.Desmond (2014) challenges the researchers to think critically about boundaries between groups and, particularly, within groups, rather than studying groups as such. In Petri's case, it seems that he encounters boundaries in relations with other children and with educators. Petri's way of handling boundaries between himself and educators is silence. In contrast, Venla and Laura, by speaking up, are able to define boundaries nearly the same way educators do. In addition, the girls are able to limit Petri's possibilities to act. This indicates that there are boundaries between the children. We argue that the boundaries arise according to children's positions in the social space. By analysing relations we may also recognise these boundaries, what they produce in the social space, how they guide participants' actions, and the division of power.The situations also reflect how speech has special value in this process, and how participation by speaking seems to be one of the structural elements of this group. By speaking, children are able to channel the

activities and reach their goals, as Venla and Laura do. In the morning circle, Petri's silence set him in a rather disadvantaged light in the eyes of the teacher and the whole peer group. Speaking carries special social meanings as well as power. Speaking also indicates how the social space is activated in relations. The participants – children as well as educators – produce and reproduce social structure for action. The relational space in the preschool is simultaneously structuring and structured by the interdependent actions of children and educators (see Dépelteau 2008).

While investigating Petri through the whole data set and different analytical phases, his position appears to be rather disadvantaged in the group. The relational process in many situations causes Petri to fail in his participation. The quantifications of the speech act in the data support this finding. (Vuorisalo 2013). However, a closer look at the network analysis reveals that Petri has a group of friends, and the theoretical notes indicate that he has an active and even leading role with his friends. The next episode conveys Petri's communication with his friends.

Petri and his friends

Boys come out to the playground. Lasse and Petri go to the storage shed. Lasse: 'Shall we do that one thing, where we hit with a bat?' Petri: 'Do you remember when we met yesterday? Who was that other kid?' Lasse: 'My friend Simo. He used to be at this preschool too'. The boys leave the shed with a baseball bat and a ball. Pasi comes along, and Lasse orders him to be a catcher. Lasse is hitting and Petri pitches. […] The boys take big toy lorries from the shed. They hold the back of the lorries and run while pushing the lorry in front of them. Taavi joins them. When Taavi comes, Lasse says to Petri: 'Let's stop driving'. Petri continues, and Lasse as well. They push the lorries, all four boys in a line. […] Lasse wants to go to the swing: 'Let's stop driving with these'. Petri: 'No, we drive'. Other boys continue. Lasse comes separately behind. […] Lasse falls down when he turns his lorry. Petri: 'Lasse had the brakes on'. All the boys are laughing. Taavi suggests that they could make brakes for the lorries with sticks. Petri and Lasse do not respond. Petri rights Lasse's lorry and pushes it back to Lasse with his own car. Taavi: 'Hey, wait!' Petri: 'Let's go, Lasse'. Petri and Lasse do not wait for Taavi, who shouts many times, 'Wait!' When Taavi finally reaches the other boys, Lasse says, 'Let's stop driving', and they take their lorries to the shed.

While scrutinising Petri's actions in this situation, his activity in relations is evident: he starts a conversation, does not stop playing though Lasse asks for this many times, jokes, and helps Lasse when he falls down. The analysis of this episode is not thorough here, but it presented a contrasting reflection for the two previous episodes. Desmond (2014) emphasises studying networks of relations in social fields instead of particular places. In Petri's case, an important part of the analysis regarding opening up his position and participation in the group was the network analysis. The image of Petri in this episode is totally different than when he is communicating with teachers and other children who are not members of his network. Petri does not speak to these children outside of his play network and his relations with them were tense (Vuorisalo 2013). This, along with an analysis of the essence and volume of relationships, enabled recognition of Petri's stable position and of how it constrains his participation in this field.

The episode indicates that in another social setting, the relational processes are organised differently, and they produce a different kind of participation (Donati 2011). Petri's

silence in certain social settings is self-evident, and characterises his participation. However, in other settings his participation looks active, and he is as talkative as others. We argue that Petri's silence is a feature of the relation, not Petri's quality as such. Processes in different social settings place Petri in varying social positions and value his resources differently. When the setting changes, Petri is able or forced to reorganise his relations, and adjusts his behaviour according to relational processes. The interdependence in relations is present all the time when children in preschool are organising their daily activities. By comparing different episodes and their relational processes in relational analysis, children's positions and repetitive practices as structural features of a social space emerge (see Crossley 2011).

The above episodes also show that there are many ways to exist in preschool childhood. The relations form differently for each child, thus giving childhood in preschool diverse definitions. For example, preschool childhood for Petri is different than it is for Venla and Laura. Children and educators are actively producing and defining preschool childhood. However, the social space and its structures also determine what kind of childhood is valid and how it can be expressed in this particular social space, called preschool.

It is also worth noting that speaking up is a way to exercise power in preschool and that children are able to use this power according to their positions, sometimes even over adults. Structure, position, and power are all under constant negotiation in the relational space of preschool (see Donati 2011). In the relational analysis of micro-level interaction, it is possible to recognise these negotiations and their meaning for childhood in preschool and even children's unequal possibilities to be involved in the social space of preschool.

Discussion

In this study, we applied ontological ideas of relational sociology and analytical ideas of relational ethnography to show how it is possible to acquire structural knowledge about preschool childhood via micro-level analysis of ethnographic data. This allowed us to analyse how social actors exist in a state of mutual relations and dependence. Relational sociology not only opens up relations, but also enables the analysis of hierarchical structures in relations.

The most important point of the analysis is the processes in relations. Desmond (2014, 565) emphasises that the interest in relational ethnography lies not in individuals, but in what occurs between them, in those processes they create. Relations and ongoing actions, negotiations and interactions are essential. The analysis described how Petri's position is defined mainly by other's actions and negotiated and produced as that of a non-active, silent participant. These data do not indicate how satisfied Petri is with his position, but they do show that his opportunities to participate offer him a relatively disadvantageous position in this group. In the data, processes in the preschool generate practices explaining the organisation of everyday life. By combining many episodes in the interpretation (which is not possible to show in its entirety here), we have been able to explore relational processes in preschools and explain how they create and stabilise structural elements via interdependent action and communication between children and educators. Snow, Morrill, and Anderson (2003, 194–195) emphasise that these types of ethnographically relevant strategies within analytical work are imperative to sensitising us to the theoretical potential of ethnographic research. As they state, a systematic

approach to fieldwork and theory-bound data analysis, both of which were used in our research, promotes the connection of field data to relevant theoretical traditions.

Through Petri's case, we were able to identify that brief moments – constant negotiations with each other – are an important part of daily life in a preschool. The data showed that relationships followed certain patterns in actions, and variations occurred between children, not in regular, routine or repeated situations. Desmond (2014, 568) highlights the study of culture and the relevance of cultural conflict rather than group culture as the focus of research. Petri seemed to be in a disadvantageous position more often than other children did. However, Petri himself or other children or adults could have changed the balance of the relations by taking away or giving Petri opportunities and 'powers' in his actions. The episodes were analysed in detail and recognised that by doing so it was possible not only to place participants in the field into their positions, but also to outline structures. The extensive analysis of micro-level data enables the creation of wider networks and structural elements when microanalyses are combined and interpreted together.

Relations appear in single episodes, but they are constructed over time – that is, not only in the present situation, but also in the past and future. For analysis, the implication is that relations have to be constructed throughout the dataset. This makes the analysis rather slow and gives it a circular nature: first relations, then positions, and finally structures emerge after several rounds of analysis (Vuorisalo and Alanen 2015). Another challenge presented by relational analysis is that the theoretical ideas are empirically tested at every turn, and that indicators for the analysis are not used as given. In relational analysis, theoretical concepts are constructed empirically (see Tavory and Timmermans 2009).

The ontological basis of relational sociology provides a solid foundation for this approach by emphasising how relational society emerges through repeated relations when new forms of society emerge (Donati 2015, 94–95). The emergent forms are stabilised as structures that operate for a certain span of time. Furthermore, the stabilisation of a structure needs time to occur. The process can generate an organisational form that can, in turn, improve coordination and social balance (Crossley 2011, 165–166, 179; Donati 2013, 205–206; Prandini 2015, 8).

As relational ontology assumes society and the institutions emerging as a result of relations among actors as well actors and context, the focus of data gathering as well as analysis should be on relational action. Consequently, ethnography is one of the best research approaches because its basic interest lies in the everyday lives of people as well as in cultural and emplaced knowledge constructed in action. By using a relational approach, we have attempted to obtain theoretical-methodological tools for addressing the interrelations between micro-level interactions and preschool as an institution on a societal macro-level (see also Vuorisalo, Rutanen, and Raittila 2015; Vuorisalo, Raittila, and Rutanen 2018). Because ethnography has also been recognised as a methodology that allows for children's participation in research and permits children to become seen as research participants, relational ethnography is an important way to generate sociological knowledge about childhood (Prout and James 1997, 8; Christensen 2004).

The results of our relational analysis could be read as sociological explanations around relational mechanisms of preschool childhood. The examples from the everyday life of a preschool show that interdependent relations are driving children to different, potentially unequal social positions in the group. As Dépelteau (2015, 62–63) has remarked, it must

be realised that individuals co-produce temporary and highly dynamic fields of everyday life. Moreover, we would like to emphasise that only individuals can also change the production of the fields. The relational approach opens up a perspective on the cultural construction of childhood in preschools. Childhood is defined by collective and cultural symbolism, politics and ideology, but it is implemented by children as well as adults individually (see Donati 2011, 60–62). Thus, this type of sociological knowledge can help children and educators to improve fair and egalitarian practices in those social institutions known as preschools.

Based on our encouraging experiences with relational ethnography, we understand that there is also a need to develop relational fieldwork. We value and believe in the benefit of the researcher's self-made ethnographic fieldwork, but we are also aware of the increasingly strict standards of publishing schedules. Yet, in the case of relational ethnography, the time-consuming, self-made data gathering process is, in our view, the best method for following hunches, as well as for finding and understanding the hidden elements of structural mechanisms in stabilisation processes (see Bengtsson 2013).

In sum, the relational process continues constantly and constructs children's lives and their understanding of human culture. This paper focused on the relational construction of preschool practice, particularly on the construction of preschool childhood. We have argued that by combining relational analysis with an ethnographic approach, it is possible to reveal how structural terms are present in each relational situation. Although the starting point of the analysis is individual action, the focus is on the relations between individuals as well as on individuals in a cultural context. By applying relational tools, we were also able to achieve more continuing and relationally determined conditions in interaction situations. Everyday life in a preschool is deeply embedded in wider institutional, economic, cultural and historical contexts.

Disclosure statement

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