Multiple Childhoods / Multidisciplinary Perspectives:
Interrogating Normativity in Childhood Studies

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Ethnicity and Early Childhood: An Ethnographic Approach to Children's Perspectives[1]

Abstract: This paper is based on a two-month ethnographic research that was conducted 2007 in a daycare center in Berlin with 22 children from 4 to 6 years of age. Despite being born and raised in Germany, in the dominant discourse most of them would be represented as 'migrant children' or 'children with migration background'. They thus come to function as 'the Other' against which a normative version of 'German children' is constructed. Language, physical appearance and family origins act as important criteria in this ethnifying of children.

Embedded within this discursive framework my research focus, however, is on the perspectives of the children themselves and how they participate in the social construction of ethnic identities. Participant observation and symbolic group interviews were employed to explore the children's practical strategies in dealing with ethnified identity ascriptions in everyday peer interactions. In line with the 'new' sociological study of childhood (e.g., James & Prout 1990) I perceive of children as competent social actors who do not just passively receive and imitate adult conceptions of the social order but actively and skillfully join in the construction of the social world. The ethnographic data show that children as young as 4 are able to use ethnic ascriptions as a 'social tool' (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001) in their peer interactions. The broad range of practical and situational processes of differentiation and valorization, of inclusion and exclusion, can be interpreted along a continuum from reproducing to challenging dominant constructions of belonging and 'the Other'.

The research contributes to our understanding of children's agency and competence as well as of the relationality, provisionality and context-dependence of children's identities. It helps to contextualize childhood studies within a social theoretical framework about social identity constructions and practices of social differentiation.

Introduction

A look at the anthropological literature shows that an intensive study of childhood, how it is experienced by the children themselves in their everyday lives, has been disregarded. A sincere dealing with the children's lives, with their perspective, has been avoided and the adults' view on children is maintained. (Weiss 1993: 102) [2]

Still, the everyday experiences especially of young children are only rarely a topic for anthropological research. If at all, children mostly appear as objects rather than subjects of their social worlds, as developing beings, incomplete adults, not yet full members of their culture. Following the newer sociological studies of childhood (e.g., James & Prout 1990) I rather perceive children as active subjects who also creatively contribute to the construction of our shared social realities and who dispose of their own particular cultural resources and means of expression.

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[1] This paper draws on my unpublished Master's thesis "Ethnizität und frühe Kindheit: Eine ethnographische Forschung in einer Berliner Kita" (Ethnicity and Early Childhood: An Ethnographic Research in a Daycare Center in Berlin) which I submitted in July 2010 to complete my Master's degree in anthropology at the Free University in Berlin under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Zitelmann.

[2] All citations from German publications have been translated into English by the author.

In the context of today's societies, as they are shaped by processes of migration and social change, my question is how children come to realize and also contribute to the social construction of ethnic identity and difference. My concern is thus less with the adults' pedagogical dealings with ethnic diversity but rather with how the children themselves appropriate and practically accomplish the meaning of ethnic ascriptions.

In order to explore the children's active and practical appropriation of categories of social difference without already presupposing and hence possibly reifying them, it seems suitable to investigate their actual situational use of such categories in everyday social contexts (Diehm et al. 2010). Thus, the ethnographic methodology helps to shed light on how ethnicity is practically and performatively constituted in children's social interactions, which at the same time draw on and (re)produce existing social power relations. Thereby it is also highlighting the interrelatedness of individual agency and social structure (West & Fenstermaker 1995).

But before presenting and discussing the ethnographic data I will first introduce my theoretical presuppositions about ethnicity and childhood as social constructions. Then follows an overview of the research literature drawing from multidisciplinary perspectives. And thirdly, I will discuss some of the specific features of doing research with children. It is only against this theoretical and methodological background that the interpretation of my ethnographic observations becomes meaningful and it thus has to be considered in light of this context.

I. Ethnicity and Childhood as Social Constructions

Ethnifying Practices, Representation, and the Construction of 'the Other'

> First, we give primary emphasis to the fact that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people. (Barth 1969: 10)

I do not understand ethnicity as some kind of natural essence or pre-given identity, but as a social construction based on and expressed through interactive and communicative practices of differentiation of social groups according to certain assumed cultural or biological characteristics (Barth 1969, Elwert 1989). To emphasize the processuality and changeability of these ascriptions, the term *ethnifying* has been used in the literature (Scherr 2000, García 2010). Furthermore, self-ascriptions and ascriptions to and by others are mutually related and always embedded in social power relations. They involve political as well as economic interests: Who is marked as 'ethnic'? From which position? What (and whose) interests are involved? Ethnifying practices thus also significantly contribute to the (re)production and legitimization of social inequalities.

One way of ethnifying can be seen in the reduction of complex social problems or conflict situations to some assumed 'cultural difference' between the social groups concerned. This leaves aside other factors like socio-economic disparity, institutional discrimination or the unequal distribution of symbolical and material resources. Thus, for example, the relatively disadvantaged position of children and youth from migrant families within the German education system is often justified with a culturalist and essentialist argumentation that draws on their cultural 'otherness', language deficits and lack of integration. This discourse however masks structural factors of the selective organizational processes at work within schools, in which ethnifying serves both as mechanism of exclusion and subsequent legitimizing discourse (Gomolla & Radtke 2002).

> The school as an organization is involved in the construction of ethnic difference in this double sense: by making differences and then justifying them with the prevalent semantics on migrants. (ibid.: 265)

Ethnifying discourses and practices are historically rooted and invoke images and patterns of thought perpetuated by tradition. Thus, postcolonial thinkers assume a continuity of colonial racisms that served European invaders for their self-constitution and legitimation. Colonial discourses essentially depended on a construction and fixation of the invariable 'Other'. Representing 'the Other' as categorically different can therefore be seen as part of the construction of a sovereign and superior European Self (Castro Varela & Dhawan 2005: 16).

There are, however, also discontinuities in the construction of 'the Other' like the shifting from biologistic to culturalistic arguments (Balibar 1991, Terkessides 2000). Here, difference is not represented anymore as a natural given but as historically grounded cultural otherness which seems equally immutable. Meanwhile, biologistic influences are still operating, as can be seen in the word 'migration background' which alludes to specific conditions for socialization and at the same time perpetuates the heritability of the status as 'Other'.

As ethnifying discourses serve to legitimize the hegemony of specific social groups, they also contribute to their self-constitution by drawing a boundary between self and other. According to Critical Whiteness Theory we should therefore depart from the persistent focus on 'the Other' and move to a reflection of 'the Self' – the unmarked but marking hegemonic center (Eggers et al. 2005). In contemporary social, political, and media discourses a White[3] German identity is not described or perceived in ethnic terms, but defines itself by the construction and demarcation of cultural others. Ethnicity as a category of social identity thus always has to be understood *relationally* (Wachendorfer 2001). The construction of a White, German, monolingual, non-migrant 'Self' defines the norm against which 'the Other' is construed as deficient, deviant, inferior – or alternatively as exotic, special, and interesting.

In this regard, Stuart Hall has criticized the continuing marginalization of Black experiences in dominant White aesthetic and cultural discourses as a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization (1990: 225). Dominant regimes of representation not only give rise to the construction of 'the Other', but in certain instances operate in such a way as to perceive and experience oneself as 'Other'. They shape the self-perceptions of every social actor through the formation of internalized and habitualized schemata of perception, thought, and action. They thus have real material effects on one's own and others' opportunities for acting.

Hall refers in this context to a historical and continuing fight for the right to representation, against marginalization and a stereotyped, naturalistic depiction of Black subjects (Hall 1992: 253). These '*identity politics*' aim at transforming the structures of representation. Representation here is not to be understood as a mimetic replication of an external reality, but as the construction of reality within the discursive sphere, in which external conditions first obtain their social and cultural meanings.

> Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 1990: 222)

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[3] The capitalizing of words like 'Other', 'Self', 'Black', and 'White' is a widely used stylistic means to indicate their construed character and their socially as well as politically charged usage.

For the German context Jäger (2001) observes that, against the prevailing opinion, racism forms a continuing part of official and public discourses in which migrants, People of Color, refugees and religious minorities are depicted in an essentializing and hierarchic imagery as permanently 'not belonging'. Meanwhile, the construction of 'the Other' cannot be reduced to a simple binary of White versus Black or non-White. In addition to phenotypic attributes, language, religion, dress style, food and other cultural or culturalized characteristics serve as criteria for the legitimation of discrimination, subordination and exclusion.

Such differentiating, often stereotypical and judgmental representations of certain social groupings are not only restricted to the media that are targeting adults. They can also be found in formats which directly address children, for instance in children's books, films, series, fairy tales, comics, songs and games (see Eggers 2005: 19ff). Thus, it can be assumed that children not only extract information on the social relevance and valuation of ethnic ascriptions from the explicit or implicit statements and behaviors of their caregivers and peers, but that they receive such information also by medial representations – anyway they will have to deal with it.

This last statement already points at the importance of the individual dimension of social processes. Ethnifying not only takes place at a structural level but reaches down into the micro-sociological level of social interactions. Categories of social identity and difference (like ethnicity, gender, class, and age) are steadily accomplished and (re)produced in a performative and interactive manner within the context of everyday social practice (West & Fenstermaker 1995). This allows for an ethnographic description of these differentiating processes in the realm of concrete practical contexts.

The subjective perception and evaluation of ethnified attributes within a specific interaction is embedded in a pre-structured social situation. Thus, also the structural conditions of which actors are mostly unaware have to be considered in the analysis of empirical findings. The meaning of ethnicity as a means to structure context-dependent social relationships can however vary significantly, and is imbued with contradictions and fluent transitions. According to the concept of '*situational ethnicity*' (Okamura 1981), actors cannot arbitrarily choose or switch their ethnic identity, but they can emphasize it, re-evaluate it or invoke some other social identity, dependent on the situation[4]. I would, however, argue that because of institutionalized power differences some social groups might find it easier to manipulate or modify, accept or reject the ethnic ascriptions directed at them. Furthermore, the individual and situational manipulation of the relevancy and perceived value of ethnic ascriptions can certainly not bring about changes in the general societal conditions that generated them. To accomplish this, a re-evaluation would need to take place collectively, in different contexts, and with real consequences for action (in the spirit of Hall's '*identity politics*', see above).

Against this background, I assume that children's possibilities – especially of children with 'migration background' – to challenge ethnifying constructions are not only developmentally but also institutionally limited. A transformation of regimes of representation (like that proposed by Hall) will certainly not be an option available to children themselves under the given societal conditions. Still, I think children dispose of a range of opportunities to act along a continuum from appropriating and reproducing ethnified constructions to questioning and contesting them. I suppose that especially the creative dealing and coming to terms with social identity prescriptions in the realms of play and phantasy should play a prominent role here.

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[4] See also Lyman & Douglass (1973) and their concept of 'impression management' as the individual and collective negotiation of ethnic identity by way of influencing social perceptions and stereotypes.

The Multiple Images of Children and Childhood

> The immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture […]. It is these 'facts of culture' which may vary and which can be said to make of childhood a social institution. (Prout & James 1990: 7)

Childhood, like ethnicity, is a *relational* construct that is only realized through the act of differentiation between adults and children, that is the interactive and performative accomplishment of a generational order (Kelle 2005). This basic differentiation, which is manifest in material, symbolical, and institutional practices, not only determines children's day-to-day realities but also governs our own (that is the adults') view on children. Thus, the image we have of children and childhood provides a specific historical and cultural framework within which we come to conceive of children *as children* (Honig 2009). It exerts a considerable impact on how we perceive, interpret and react to children's practices and forms of expression. At the same time, the generational difference is always interfering with other lines of social differentiation, like ethnicity, gender, and class. *Childhoods*, therefore, always exist in the plural.

Another parallel to the construction of ethnicity as discussed above is that cultural images of children and childhood, too, form part of the constitution of the adult 'Self'. As historically and culturally variable meaning systems they relate to and, also critically, comment on the adult world. They serve as a kind of screen, on which we project our notions of what has been 'lost' or how we *as adults* are 'ahead' of children, what they are lacking and what we can offer them (Bühler-Niederberger 2005).

My observations and interpretations, my methodological approach and my positioning in the field, are thus embedded in culturally and historically specific imageries of children and childhood. A romanticized image of children as 'innocent beings' or a deficit-oriented image of them as 'incomplete adults' are particularly influential in everyday perceptions of children as well as in scientific discourse. Therefore, I will critically assess these images of childhood and then successively unfold and reflect upon my own constructivist view on children as 'competent social actors'. These different representations are however not to be understood as mutually exclusive. Rather, they are interrelated, supporting and challenging each other in complex ways.

A common-sense assumption I frequently encountered during my research was that ethnicity would just be irrelevant to children at this age. After all, what could I investigate there? Part of this assumption is that if children would display ethnifying ascriptions, stereotypic views, and exclusionary behaviors at all, then only because they imitate adult ways, but certainly not because they had their own way of understanding and handling these processes. Children are denied an active part in the construction of ethnic differences and they are projected into a space outside of societal structures and processes. This argument builds on an image of the 'innocent' child, 'pure' and unaffected by social problems. It seems closer to nature, therefore more naïve and less corrupted. This romanticist image is historically rooted and dates back at least to the writings of the 18th century French philosopher and pedagogue Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Baader 2004).

Such idealizing constructions in turn contribute to the legitimation and reproduction of social power relations in that they can be instrumentalized to avoid a critical discussion of ethnifying processes and exclusionary practices in children's everyday realities (Van Ausdale

& Feagin 2001)[5]. If, on the contrary, I insist that children do become affected by such social processes and that they also actively engage in them, there is, however, again the danger of idealizing, in that the image of the children as 'competent social actors' may mask important differences (such as power differences) between children and adults (James 2007).

Another influential image of children that governed anthropological and sociological studies of childhood for a long time was the so-called socialization paradigm[6]. Thus, for example, the *culture and personality* school of the 1930s to the 60s (e.g., Mead 1928, 1930, Benedict 1946, Whiting 1963) perceived of children mainly as passive recipients of adult input, a kind of 'empty vessel' into which adult educators could pour their social and cultural norms, values and expectations. This model of enculturation should serve to explain and render observable the continuity of cultural traditions and the reproduction of social order. Quite the contrary, this adult-centric view precluded researchers to look more closely at the concrete processes by which children become members of a cultural group. This approach is based on an image of the child as 'the Other', diametrically opposed to adults as the norm from which children deviate (Caputo 1995). Children are seen as 'immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial and a-cultural' while adults are regarded as 'mature, rational competent, social and autonomous' (MacKay 1973: 27-28, cited in Christensen & Prout 2005: 48). The focus here is on the *becoming*, not the *being* of children. And the transmission of cultural values and practices through socialization appears as a rather automatic, unproblematic process.

Since the 1970s however, the mechanistic and deterministic character of 'culture and personality' research and of socialization research in general has increasingly been called into question (e.g., Hardman 1973, MacKay 1973, Schwartzman 1978, Speier 1976). It is argued that important characteristics of children's cultural being that cannot be reduced to a mere preparation for adult life have been ignored, just as inconsistencies, contradictions, and discontinuities in the process of socialization. Also, the significance of social interactions with other children, i.e. the importance of *peer relations*, has been underestimated. Through the focus on adults' perspectives, their cultural representations of children and childhood, of socialization and development, the perspectives of children and their active contributions to these processes have been left unexplored.

> Children are being acted upon, they don't act on their own, they are only observed, rarely interrogated, it is talked about them, they don't talk themselves, and no efforts are being made to understand their distinctive forms of expression. (Van de Loo & Reinhart 1993: 7f.)

Drawing on this critique, Prout and James (1990: 8) summarize the "new paradigm" for the sociological study of childhood under the following (condensed) six key features:

(1) Childhood is seen as a social construction;
(2) It is intersecting with other variables of social analysis;
(3) Children's cultures are worthy of study in their own right;
(4) Children actively participate in the construction of their own and others' social worlds;
(5) Ethnography is a useful methodological approach to capture children's voices;
(6) Childhood researchers are engaged in the social (re)construction of childhood.

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[5] Thus, it is not surprising that it were exclusively White adults, members of the majority, who claimed that ethnicity would be of no significance in the life of young children.
[6] These approaches to childhood research heavily drew on influences of traditional developmental psychological concepts that emphasized the function of adults as role-models, of imitation and reinforcement as learning mechanisms, and that were based on an evolutionist idea of unilinear development (Prout & James 1990: 10f.).

Children are no longer seen as immature, incomplete and inferior to adults. Instead of presupposing their 'otherness' as a given, it is asked how differences between adults and children are '*made*' in actual cultural practice (Kelle 2005) and how the generational difference as a structural element of society affects the everyday interactions between children and adults as well as between the children themselves.

Drawing on *symbolical interactionism* and *social constructivism* these more recent approaches to childhood research also emphasize the active role of children in their socialization, and explore how children take information from their social surroundings, interpret, organize and apply it. Here, also the interactions and social relations between peers gain in importance and increasingly get into the focus of ethnographic studies (e.g., Corsaro 1985, Thorne 1993). This *interpretive* approach asks how children, through their practical interactions in social settings, develop the interpretive and communicative skills that allow them to reproduce categories of social order in their respective interactive contexts. Interactions with peers significantly contribute to the appropriation and application of social knowledge, in that they offer the opportunity to deal and come to terms with problems that affect and concern them *as children* and to develop a certain degree of control over their own life circumstances (Corsaro 1997). Children's role play, for instance, serves as important context for the developing of and experimenting with cultural knowledge, interactive and communicative competencies, as well as social norms and rules.

> In role play children do not simply imitate adult models, but rather use information acquired from observation and interactive experience with adults to reproduce social events. (Corsaro 1985: 177)

Thus, children are not seen as completely independent, autonomous beings but as situated within a variety of social contexts. The view of children as active subjects rests on a *relational* understanding of subjectivity that comprehends autonomy and interdependence as mutually interrelated. Thus, children's subjective opportunities for action are only evolving out of the social contexts and relational networks in which they are embedded.

> In order to create liberating discourses, it is important to avoid placing children in dichotomous constructions of subjectivity as either dependent or independent, either mature or immature, either vulnerable or competent, either equal or unequal to adults. (Kjørholt, Moss & Clark 2005: 176)

If children are to be seen not as passive recipients of adult practices of enculturation, but as active (co)constructors of their social worlds, then it can be assumed that they do not just passively replicate ethnifying ascriptions but also actively contribute to the construction of ethnic difference. Their active and creative engagement with these processes is likely to encompass reproductive as well as transformative aspects. Thereby, the concrete contents of their interactions are always mediated by the different social contexts in which children are situated and that directly or indirectly bear on their development (cf. Bronfenbrenner 1981). The empirical question of my ethnographic research, however, is not to speculate about the hypothetical causes or sources of children's reasoning about ethnicity, but rather to explore how ethnifying constructions are actively appropriated and used by children in their actual interactive practices.

II. Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Ethnicity and Early Childhood

To investigate the complex role and practical significance of ethnic constructions in children's everyday lives, a multi-perspectival approach seems promising. The consideration of psychological, pedagogical, and anthropological/sociological approaches helps to deepen the respective disciplinary perspectives and points to the eventual gaps or 'blind spots' that could arise from a too narrowly defined viewpoint (Eggers 2005).

Thus, psychological approaches with their focus on individual developmental processes tend to neglect the embeddedness of these processes in social contexts, while sociological and anthropological perspectives on the reproduction of social structures and cultural meaning systems may underestimate the multiple subjective ways of perceiving and acting upon these structures and meanings. Moreover, pedagogical approaches and their emphasis on action and change run the risk of reducing the complexity of socio-culturally rooted and individually meaningful constructions of ethnic difference and social inequality, as if these could be overcome just through educational programs and individual 'emancipation' (ibid.: 73). However, these problems or gaps are of course only tendencies, since each of the disciplinary approaches is in itself very heterogeneous and differentiated.

Psychological Approaches

Over a long period of time, a wide range of social and developmental psychological studies on the acquisition of racial or ethnic categories and preferences has shown that children as young as two or three already dispose of a certain social knowledge about ethnic ascriptions and their perceived social values (see Mac Naughton & Davis 2009 for a critical overview)[7].

Most of these studies worked with a projective experimental methodology, for example showing the children racially stereotyped pictures or dolls and asking them to choose which one looks like themselves, which one is the 'better' or which one they like most etc. The findings of these studies led to the conceptualization of cognitive developmental models on the acquisition of racial attitudes, like the 3-stages-model proposed by Mary Goodman (1964, summarized in Mac Naughton & Davis 2009: 20).

(1) *Racial awareness* (at about 2-3 years) – children first notice ethnic/racial differences
(2) *Racial orientation* (at about 4-5 years) – children first express (positive as well as negative) attitudes towards specific ethnic groups
(3) *True racial attitude* (at about 7-9 years) – children begin to express complex, stereotypical racial attitudes and prejudice

These studies tend to assume a 'natural' developmental sequence in the acquisition of social identity concepts, which involves the danger of a reification or naturalization of such categories as they are always presupposed as 'given' within this study design. Furthermore, from this kind of methodological approach it can hardly be explored how racial/ethnic categories are used in real-life situations and what relevance they have in the everyday interactive and communicative practices of young children with their peers and caregivers. Also, the question remains open, how categories of social difference are constructed and adopted within the social contexts that the children have to cope with every day.

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[7] For reviews of the early psychological research on this topic see for example Milner (1975), Williams & Morland (1976) or Phinney & Rotheram (1987).

Pedagogical Approaches

The above mentioned psychological studies have revealed that children begin to engage with issues of ethnic identification and differentiation already at a very early age. Thus, they challenge the image of the 'innocent' and 'colorblind' child, who does not notice, let alone actively uses these categorizations. From a pedagogical point of view it is concluded that intercultural and antiracist pedagogical work should begin as early as possible[8]. Against the objection that children only become aware of such issues by way of pedagogical interventions, it can be argued that children *in any case* have to deal with matters that shape their social environments and that pedagogical work should relate to these everyday experiences.

Often, however, antiracist education is narrowly conceived as the modification of individual racialized attitudes and stereotypes, thus failing to consider the historical and socio-cultural context as well as the structural and institutional dimensions of racism and ethnifying (Holzkamp 1994). Current critique of 'intercultural pedagogy' centers on the risk to reify ethnic/cultural differences and leave aside their interrelatedness with other categories of social difference, thus reducing children to representatives of 'their' culture (Diehm 1995). Also, an egalitarian difference between cultures as 'different but equal' is suggested, thereby masking structural and material inequality and relations of domination. Thus, the challenge for pedagogical work and its attendant scientific conceptualization is on the one hand not to ignore ethnic or cultural difference and assume homogeneity and assimilation, while on the other hand not to stereotype and ontologize these differences and perpetuate culturalistic and ethnifying discourses. Therefore, Diehm (ibid.) asks for a combination of situation, biography and case orientation in pedagogical practice in order to account for the specific life situation of children and their families as well as for structural factors of unequally distributed social resources and privileges (such as educational opportunities). Mecheril (2004) argues furthermore for a reflexive perspective that is conscious of the fact that inequality cannot be overcome by pedagogical means alone, but which at the same time questions constructions of 'the Other' in pedagogical approaches and the involvement of pedagogical institutions in the reproduction of orders of belonging and social inequality (cf. Gomolla & Radtke 2002).

Glenda Mac Naughton and Karina Davis (2009) provide one of the few examples of education scientific studies on the empirical role of ethnicity in the everyday social contexts of children. They adopt a deconstructionist, postcolonial perspective to understand local processes in the schools and daycare centers they investigate as embedded in global historical and political processes of colonization, de- and re-colonization that shape the social power relations in which children come to deal with ethnicity and 'race'.

> Identities, including racial identities, are therefore shaped in and through discourses of 'race' that preexist the children's entry into the world. (ibid.: 34)

They question an image of the young child as naïve and ignorant, incapable of actively engaging with ethnified and racialized constructions. Quite the contrary, children are always involved in these socio-political processes in the course of constituting their own identities. The authors demand of pedagogic professionals to deal with these issues in children's lives – to confront rather than to ignore them – and also to have a critical look at their own ethnifying schemata of perception, thought and action. The aim should be to create more just living

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[8] See for instance Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989), Banks (1989), Brown (1998), Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001), Mac Naughton & Davis (2009).

spaces and learning opportunities for children, while being aware that the educational context provides only one – albeit an important one – among many contexts in which ethnic differences are constructed. It is important also to take these other (historical, political, medial, familial…) contexts into account and to collaboratively develop strategies for action.

A presupposition for the development of constructive pedagogical approaches, however, would be to acknowledge and try to comprehend the meaning and influence of ethnicity and racism in children's lives. First of all, it should be investigated how children themselves construct and negotiate ethnic identities in their everyday lives. Thus, the question how ethnifying processes take place within the institutionalized environment of early childhood education is an important matter for pedagogical practice as well as for educational research with children (cf. Diehm & Kuhn 2005, 2006).

Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives

The new social studies of childhood combine sociological and anthropological perspectives in that they ask both how childhood forms a structural component of modern societies and how it is culturally constituted in the interactive practices of children and adults (cf. Christensen & Prout 2005). Here, an ethnographic approach proves to be central for an understanding of children's life worlds and perspectives.

According to William A. Corsaro's concept of '*interpretive reproduction*' (e.g., 1985, 1997) children develop social concepts and categories by interactively engaging with their social environment and come to use these concepts in accordance with the situational conditions of their everyday activities. Their social knowledge does not need to be consciously reflected nor can it be easily explicated when adults ask about it – mostly from an adult-centric perspective and stripped of context. To understand these processes it is therefore necessary to seek out children in their actual life worlds and investigate their acquisition and application of social concepts in everyday practice.

> If children construct social knowledge and acquire interactive skills by acting on their environment, there is a need to examine these actions within their social context […]. (Corsaro 1985: 268)

Important early ethnographic studies on the practical acquisition of social concepts within the peer culture are for example Corsaro's "*Friendship and Peer Culture in the Early Years*" (1985) and Barrie Thorne's "*Gender Play: Boys and Girls at School*" (1993.)

Based on her ethnographic research in two elementary schools in the US, Thorne (1993) describes the "choreography of separation and integration" of the sexes. She emphasizes that the construction of gender as a social category not only involves the drawing of boundaries between girls and boys but also encompasses moments of "neutralization" when the social relevance of gender moves into the background. Referring to the work of Frederik Barth (1969) she uses the term '*borderwork*' to describe how gender becomes relevant in certain situations and contexts and is used as an oppositional, antagonistic category to frame or define the respective situation. Yet, it is important to her to get beyond the notion of gender as a dichotomous construction of separation and difference. So she stresses the contextuality and variability of the meaning of gender as a category of social identity which is moreover always interfering with other categories like ethnicity, class, sexuality, age etc.

An emphasis on social context shifts analysis from fixing abstract and binary differences to examining the social relations in which multiple differences are constructed and given meaning. (ibid.: 109)

There are only few ethnographic studies on the role and meaning of ethnicity in early child-hood – that is on the question how children practically accomplish and apply ethnifying categories in their everyday social interactions (e.g., Holmes 1995, Connolly 1998, Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001, Lappalainen 2009 and in Germany the study of Diehm & Kuhn 2005, 2006).

Paul Connolly (1998) for example describes 5 to 6-year-old children's engagement in discourses on 'race', gender, and sexuality as embedded in the contexts of national politics, inner-city planning and the school. He shows how these interconnected discourses influence local images of femininity and masculinity and how children actively appropriate and rework these gendered and racialized identity constructions within their own interactions. In moving his analysis also *beyond* the localized practices to the multiple contexts in which these are embedded he avoids the kind of 'situationism' that ethnographic research is often criticized for (cf. Kelle 2005). Through a number of detailed ethnographic case studies he manages to reveal the complexity, contextuality and variability in children's dealing with the racialized discourses of their school and neighborhood in the course of their appropriation of gender identities. He focuses on the children's active role in appropriating these discourses, not just passively reproducing them, but drawing on them in manifold ways in the course of constructing their own identities. The notion of '*decentered selves*' points to the multiplicity of discourses within which children are positioned and the variability but also contradictory nature of their identity constructions as they move from one context to another.

While Connolly's analyses are mainly based on children's statements during interview situations, Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin (2001) ground their interpretations primarily on the observed interactions of 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds in the daycare environment. They stress the children's instrumental use of ethnifying and racializing concepts as a '*social tool*' to define self and others, to control ongoing interactions, to legitimate own privileges, as well as to in- and exclude. They represent children as competent actors who can apply their knowledge about the social relevance of aspects such as skin color, nationality, language etc. in their interactions with each other and with adults. Verbal and nonverbal practices act together in the active accomplishment of racialized and ethnified identity constructions.

By using racialized language in social contexts, children develop their own individuality in relation to others, garner attention from other children and adults, and – at least in the case of the dominant-group children – develop a strong sense of power over others. The 'doing' of racial and ethnic matters is what embeds these things strongly in their minds. (ibid.: 23)

In Germany Isabell Diehm and Melanie Kuhn (2005, 2006) follow up this interpretation with their concept of '*doing ethnicity*'. They also adopt the viewpoint that already very young children are capable of using the socially relevant ethnic distinctions they encounter day-to-day in a competent and creative way, thus anew according them relevance through their interactive and performative usage (Diehm & Kuhn 2006: 147).

With this micro-analytical, ethnographic focus on individual interaction and concrete performative practices neither Van Ausdale and Feagin nor Diehm and Kuhn want to neglect the social power relations that pre-structure the interactive situations. Rather, the situational significance of ethnicity is always referring to its institutional and discursive anchoring as a struc-

tural component of society that can be drawn upon to legitimate and reproduce the unequal distribution of social power and resources.

> Even when we pursue the aim to reconstruct the respective meanings that children assign to ethnicity as a category in their interactions, the context-dependency of these practices – and that explicitly means their embeddedness in socio-ethnic relational structures – is acknowledged and taken into account. (Diehm et al. 2010: 81)

Exactly this interplay and interrelatedness between structure and agency, micro and macro levels, individual and society that is expressed in concepts like '*interpretive reproduction*', '*borderwork*', '*decentered selves*', '*social tool*', and '*doing ethnicity*' has to be kept in mind if we do not want to distort and impede our understanding by employing only a one-sided focus. Only then is the ethnographic observation and description of concrete everyday practices able to reconstruct and relate these practices to processes of social reproduction as well as to the possibility for social change (cf. West & Fenstermaker 1995).

III. Doing Ethnographic Research in Early Childhood Settings

Field Access and the Role of the Researcher

> A fundamental condition for getting these glimpses of multiple cultures as a basis for providing an honest rendering of what childhood might be is to get access to the social worlds of children […] not only [as] a matter of being allowed to be present in the kindergarten, but rather about being allowed to *participate*, and thus about the children's trust and willingness to engage with me and involve me in their social worlds. (Warming 2005: 58)

To get access to children's social worlds and perspectives it is important to build up a trusting and open relationship. Given the institutional context of the research, this first of all required the parents' and caregivers' consent as well as confidence. Negotiations with these so-called 'gatekeepers' are indispensible in doing research with children. Also the children themselves should have the opportunity to meet the researcher already before the onset of the actual fieldwork and to give or refuse their consent.

Therefore, I got in contact with the daycare center well before starting the research and introduced myself to the director and the two caregivers of the group I planned to attend. After gaining their approval I participated in a parents' meeting and also wrote a letter about my research plans that was attached to the center's notice board in the entrance hall. All but one parent gave their consent with the research so I assured her not to take any written notes or recordings of her child. Next, I introduced myself to the children in a morning circle where I tried to explain my presence and intentions to them in as comprehensible terms as possible. It was especially important to me not to appear as another educator and authority figure. So I described myself as a student who wants to learn *from them* how they spend their time in kindergarten, what they like and dislike, what and who they play with etc. Also later during the research, I often asked them about their permission to watch them, play with them or write certain things down in my notebook.

This kind of entry into children's life worlds has been described by Corsaro (1985) as '*reactive field entry*', that is letting the children approach the researcher without imposing oneself on their interactions and dominating the situation as adults usually do. To avoid an adult-centric way of dealing with the children it is helpful to observe carefully children's interactive

styles and adopt these as own research strategies – for example first watching a situation from the outside and waiting to be invited or doing something similar and then join the activity. This way the researcher does not actively initiate or guide interactions but lets herself be guided by the children (what Corsaro calls '*peripheral participation*', ibid.: 32).

In this ongoing process of gaining access it is important to constantly question own biases and to reflect and document the negotiation of one's own role in the research setting. Therefore I kept a field diary that helped me better contextualize and evaluate the empirical data during my later analyses.

> All ethnographic material has to be understood reflexively, that is as a product of a research process in which a particular interpretation is made by an observer in relation to the settings in which the observations are made. (Prout & James 1990: 27)

In an ethnographic research with children the power differential that is inherent in the relation between researcher and researched is aggravated by the generational distance between children and adults. Differences in power and authority can have a disturbing or restrictive impact on children's activities and expressions. To counter this hierarchical order I tried to adopt a less authoritarian role (see Fine & Sandstrom 1988 on '*friend role*' or Mandell 1988 on the '*least adult role*').

However, I encountered some difficulties and contradictions in this intended role-taking not only with parents and caretakers but also with the children and with my own subjective experience. Thus, it were not only the adults who expected me to intervene when something 'dangerous' or 'unacceptable' occurred. Also the children themselves were quite irritated when I didn't discipline them when they quarreled or did something forbidden. Sometimes they even explicitly asked me to intervene and then seemed somehow disappointed when I said "But I cannot help you. I am no educator." So I was not always sure how to behave and position myself. From time to time I found myself in situations when I had to conform more strongly to the usual expectations of adult behavior – for example when a situation seemed rather precarious and no other adults were present or when we made an excursion and I volunteered to 'look after' the children, too. In the end, my behavior was not as consequent as I had planned and my role in the research setting was never definitely settled but always redefined according to the situation and the participants' interests. It also has to be kept in mind that not the researcher all by herself defines and decides on her role.

> Participants also make and remake these decisions as they come to know more about the situation and realize the benefits and difficulties that were not initially apparent. (Graue & Walsh 1998: 76)

Finally, relations in the field not only involve the dyadic relationship between researcher and researched but develop between multiple actor groups with differing viewpoints, expectations and interests. My positioning as a researcher in the daycare setting thus arose from the ongoing negotiations with the children, caregivers, and parents. Until the end it remained ambiguous and depended on the situational context. This can be described as a gradual process of participation and acceptance in which the own role is not negotiated and settled once and for all, but continuously redefined and renegotiated during the whole time of the research project (cf. Delamont 2002: 95, Graue & Walsh 1998: 72ff.).

Most of the time, however, I was able to focus my attention only to what was occurring nearby, without letting myself be distracted by the wider environment – another strategy I

learned from the children. It is an important basis for their social interactions to be able to carry on their play or activity also despite the disruptive influences of their surroundings (cf. Corsaro 1985). Other strategies to adopt a kind of 'atypical adult role' are for example not exercising much control, interacting at eye level, and of course accepting the children as equal partners in interaction and competent constructors of their own social worlds (Holmes 1998: 17ff.).

> Adult fieldworkers are never fully accepted into children's cultures because they can never relinquish their adult status. Rather, the fieldworker becomes the learner and the children become the teachers in the fieldworker's attempt to experience the children's ways of knowing about the world. (ibid.: 19)

Thus, terms such as '*least adult role*' or '*friend role*' are a bit misleading, because the relationship between adult researcher and children participants can seldom be as equal and open as a real friendship. There always remains a generational distance and power differential – in the end it is me as the researcher who controls when our contact starts and when it will end. Moreover, it is my research interests that significantly lead the research process, so my relations with the children can be seen as rather instrumental (Graue & Walsh 1998: 80). Last but not least, there is no methodological 'recipe' for friendship.

Especially when facing this challenging situation it is crucial to be self-conscious and reflexive about power relations and at least try to work against them. The underlying intention to perceive and to appreciate the interests and perspectives of children is worth a try and can lead to very interesting insights into their everyday culture and social practice that would not have been visible from a more 'typical' adult viewpoint. According to Corsaro (1985) it is not about behaving 'like a child' but behaving *not* like other adults. If the children perceive the researcher as different from other adults in the setting, they are more likely not to inhibit certain actions or utterances because of anticipated negative reactions (ibid.: 27f).

Examples that can illustrate the success of these negotiations are secrets the children told me (like who kissed whom); candy and bubblegum they offered me (although these were forbidden); that they in case of conflicts turned to the caregivers even when those were much farther away; that they did not interrupt their play when I joined them; how often they teased me; and most of all of course our frequent playing together in the play corners or in the garden.

But the most obvious aspect that defined my 'special' role for the children was apparently my steadily taking notes. By and by they got so much accustomed to it that they even sometimes wondered "Claudia, why don't you take notes?" or they instructed me "Here, you can write this down!"

Interviews with Children

> Children know more than they know. They surely know more about what they know than the researcher does. The purpose of interviews is to get them talk about what they know. (Graue & Walsh 1998: 122)

Ethnography as a multi-method approach encompasses a range of inquiry techniques. Participant observations and their attendant field notes are complemented by informal conversations, document analyses and narrative or symbolic interviews (cf. Elwert 2003). In this paragraph I want to reflect upon the specific challenges and opportunities as well as my own personal experiences in doing qualitative interviews with children.

There exists a range of methodological literature on interviewing children[9]. For the most part the authors emphasize the importance of building up a trustful relationship and being open to children's communicative styles as well as departing from an adult-centric perspective in conducting the interview. They also touch upon practical issues and advices, like how to formulate questions adequately, to create a calm and pleasurable ambiance for the interview and how to use technical devices and other materials.

I only started with the interviews after a month of intensive participant observations. Based on my knowledge of the children and the everyday context I could then ask more meaningful questions and better understand and relate to their answers. I chose narrative and symbolic interviews because these do not only rely on the verbal communication styles preferred by most adults, but also involve children's own creative products. The drawings that the children produced during these interviews can be seen as symbolic expressions of the children's perspectives and also formed a starting point for further conversation and interpretation (Fuhs 2000: 99f.). Furthermore, the narrative approach is open to the children's constructions so that they themselves can choose the topics and issues they want to talk about (Eide & Winger 2005). I also interviewed the children in small groups (2-3) which they could choose themselves so that at least the numerical ratio acted against the generational dominance of the adult interviewer. Group solidarity and dynamics may of course constrain individual expression of opinions, but the group interview also allows for the expression of their collective experiences and takes into account the importance of peer interaction for children's thought and development (Heinzel 2000: 119).

With the parents' and children's consent I audio-recorded the interviews so that I was able to concentrate more on the situation and observe also the nonverbal communication. I asked the children to tell me more about them, about their family and friends, what they liked etc. I was interested in whether they brought up aspects of ethnic identity on their own initiative or whether this played only a minor role in their self-presentations. This open-ended style of conversation entailed the difficulty to keep track of my own concerns while at the same being open for the children's interests and perspectives (Eide & Winger 2005)[10]. It required a lot of flexibility and attention, but in the end the children really seemed to appreciate that I showed this heightened interest in their experiences and knowledge. It gives them room for their own concerns and takes them serious as active subjects in the processes of constructing their identities. Some of the children later even came up to me to do an interview with me about my own hobbies, favorite games, places, dishes etc. and took some 'notes' of my answers in my notebook. This role inversion demonstrates that an open and trustful relation with the children can at least in part help to counter the asymmetrical relationship between researcher/adult and researched/children. The children thus showed me how they perceived my role and interests and gave a vivid example of the active participation of children as competent actors in the research process. Here, power hierarchies are situationally challenged and children have the opportunity to experiment with new roles.

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[9] See for example: Brooker (2001), Curtin (2001), Delfos (2008), Eide & Winger (2005), Fuhs (2000), Heinzel (1997), Jorgenson & Sullivan 2010), Lipski (1998), Mey (2003), Trautmann (2010).

[10] I introduced the interview situation as a kind of game. But, as always, the situation is not defined once at the beginning and only by one person. Rather, it is constantly redefined by all participants and it is important to clearly explain one's own interests as well as to take those of the others into account. Thus, in my first interview one of the boys asked after a while: "And when do we finally start crafting?" Obviously, he associated the situation with other group activities initiated and directed by adults that were quite typical for the pedagogical practice in this daycare center.

Concerning the question of 'truth' in interviews with children (Graue & Walsh 1998: 120) it should be kept in mind that interviews are not intended to yield testimonies or confessions. 'Invented' answers, too, form part of a collaborative process of constructing meaning and are therefore important for an understanding of children's perspectives. Children's statements during interviews are in any case to be perceived in the context of the whole research experience, especially the participant observation. Finally, there is not the one 'authentic' perspective of children, but rather all of their activities and statements have to be understood in relation to their respective contexts (Connolly 2008, Clark, Kjørholt & Moss 2005).

Research Ethics

Research with children poses some specific methodical and ethical problems (Farrell 2005). Especially the embeddedness of the adult-child-relationship in an asymmetrical generational order yields problems for understanding the children's perspectives. The hierarchical structuring of generational relations forms an important background for the observation and interpretation of children's expressions (Fuhs 2000). Listening to (and observing) children can therefore never be completely 'neutral', but questions of power and inequality have to be critically considered throughout the whole research process (Clark, Kjørholt & Moss 2005).

Children's rights as participants in research are comparatively limited. An *'informed consent'* in the classical sense (see Marshall 2001) can hardly be obtained from them. Firstly, they are developmentally not yet in a position to really understand the researcher's intentions. And secondly, a too detailed explication would possibly have a distorting impact on their behavior toward the researcher. In order to recognize children as competent social actors and to build up a trusting relationship it is therefore indispensible to steadily clarify in appropriate terms one's own intentions as well as to ask about *their* understandings of the situation.

Of course the research should not harm children. But should it serve their interests (Prengel 2003)? Here the question would be what exactly the interests of children are and who defines them. In my opinion, the most important thing is to deal respectfully with the children, to take their forms of expression serious and to be willing to learn from the children as experts of their own social worlds (Graue & Walsh 1998: 56ff.). With this appreciative approach the research can contribute to children's sense of self-esteem and agency (cf. Christensen 2004).

The feedback of research results within pedagogical, political and scientific practice and discourse gives rise to further consequences beyond the particular research setting. Thus, it is important to be conscious of one's own responsibility. Because of the interplay of scientific terminology, constitution of objects and forms of representation with historical, social, and political contexts, research can never be entirely 'neutral' or 'innocent', but is always involved in the (re)production of social categorizations and interrelated power relations (Prout & James 1990: 29ff.). So it remains an irreducible dilemma that the categories we want to investigate always to a certain extent pre-structure our perceptions, thought and actions (Kelle & Breidenstein 1996: 64). A research about ethnicity and early childhood thus inevitably takes part in the social construction of childhood (Honig 2009) as well as of ethnicity (Diehm et al. 2010) and consequently in the possible perpetuation and reification of the differences between children and adults as well as between the children themselves. It could, however, also challenge our image of children and the adult-centric view of their practices and help to avoid reification by critically and self-reflexively exploring the complexity and diversity of children's practical strategies in dealing with ethnic constructions in concrete situational contexts.

IV. The Children's 'Doing' of Ethnicity

The Spatial and Social Context of the Daycare Center

The ethnographic research project was conducted from mid-February to mid-April 2007 and was part of my graduate degree program in cultural anthropology. During this time I was present in the center up to eight hours each day of the week. The daycare center in which the research took place was situated in the inner city of Berlin and served children from 0 to 6 years of age. I attended a group of 22 4- to 6-year-olds who came from families with rather mixed social backgrounds. Considering the parents' education and occupation their socio-economic status ranged from lower to middle class. Furthermore, 18 of the children had a so-called 'migration background', that is their parents or grandparents migrated to Germany from various European and non-European countries (i.e., Turkey, Tunisia, Iraq, Lebanon, Chechnya, Ukraine, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Italy, Poland, and China).

Pedagogically the center follows a situation-oriented approach, which also includes the appreciation of cultural plurality that is seen to provide valuable educational opportunities (see Preissing 2003). It strives for an inclusive, appreciative, and respectful dealing with ethnic heterogeneity and with diversity in general. Thus, the pedagogical practice is guided by an ideal of democratic and anti-bias education. Furthermore, it puts special emphasis on arts and creativity. These emphases are also reflected in the interior design and decoration of the center, for example in the displays of the children's numerous creative products, the world maps on the walls of each group's room, calendars with festivities and holidays in diverse cultures, or an information bulletin for parents in numerous languages.

The common language of intercourse used in the center was German without there being an explicit rule or language promotion program. Sometimes one of the caregivers who had herself a 'migration background' talked in Turkish to some of the children, but that was rather an exception. Furthermore, the children had numerous opportunities to encounter spoken and written language more closely, for example during morning circles when we sang songs, heard poems etc., or in the book corner where I also found some children's books in Turkish, Italian, English etc. Moreover, the letters of the alphabet were everywhere on the wall, in puzzles, games etc. and all children had their own portfolio with pictures they drew, photos of them in the center and at home with the family, and learning stories that the caregivers had written. So, literacy was an important and omnipresent issue, especially as some of the older children in the group were preparing for their upcoming transition to school in summer.

The pedagogical activities during my presence centered on a project on 'body images/body experiences' (e.g., body painting, clay figures, visiting an exhibition on sculptures) and on Easter (songs, handicrafts etc. but without religious connotations). Ethnicity was not brought up as an explicit issue by the caregivers, at least as far as I could observe. It has, however, to be stressed that this was not the focus of my research, and that I concentrated my observations on the children's dealing with ethnic categorizations and concepts in their own peer inter-actions. Thus, I mainly observed the children during free play, which formed a basic part of their daily routines. While the activities offered and directed by the caregivers only involved small groups of children, the other children could freely choose what to do and with whom. It was especially these situations that were the most interesting to me.

In this section I want to illustrate the children's multifaceted ways of dealing with aspects of their identities that are socially relevant in the construction of ethnicity. I will present and discuss narrative episodes from everyday practice as well as extracts from interviews to provide evidence for the variability and complexity of children's perspectives and practical strategies which are interpreted in view of the social and theoretical background described so far[11].

One important aspect in the social construction of ethnic identity and difference is of course language and also the children themselves brought up this issue several times. I was impressed by their multilingual skills, for example when they were brought in the morning and said goodbye to their parents in Polish, Russian or whatever, then turning to the other children at the breakfast table and asking for something in German. For most of them the daycare context seemed to require speaking German, while their other language(s) was confined to the sphere of the home and family. One girl even said to me that she would not dare to speak Russian in the center – only at home with her Mom. It is interesting to observe what happens when the two spheres, center and family, get mixed up as in the following scene.

Hadija is playing in the sandbox with her younger brother Faraj (after one of the caregivers of Faraj's group asked her to). I sit next to them and start playing with the sand molds, too. She says something in German to me (like "Here you have some salt.") and then talks in Arabic to her brother who also answers her in Arabic. I listen attentively but don't comment on it. She turns to me and explains: "He always says Arabic. He can't say German." I reply: "He'll learn." And she goes on: "Yes, he must learn. But he learns so slowly!" Faraj now also joins the discussion and loudly asserts: "But I learn!" Then both of them continue their play with the sand molds.

After a while Muna, a 5-year-old girl who has just been enrolled in the center, passes by and hears Faraj saying something in Arabic to Hadija who also answers him in Arabic. Muna asks Hadija in German: "Why is he speaking Arabic?" Hadija turns away from her and while putting sand in a mold she says: "He can't speak Arabic." (Maybe she meant "German" like in her earlier statement towards me?) Muna then talks in Arabic to Faraj (I only understand "Almani" that is "German") but he doesn't respond and concentrates his attention on his sand cakes again. She asks him in German: "Are you Arab, too?" Hadija wants to answer but Muna interrupts her: "No, I'm not talking to you. I talk to him." She asks again: "Are you Arab?" He still doesn't respond, so she goes away.

Some minutes later, she again hears Hadija and Faraj speaking Arabic. She turns to them: "I heard it. He speaks Arabic." And then toward Faraj while pointing to her mouth: "Why don't you speak like this?" He gives her only a short look but still no answer. So Muna leaves again and Hadija and Faraj keep on playing and speaking Arabic with each other…

There is a strong discourse in the German media and public debate that migrant children should learn German already before they enter school to improve their chances for educational success. This discourse draws the attention off from the discriminating and selective functioning of the school system and focuses instead on the 'deficient' language skills of individual children. In the preceding scene, all of us, the children as well as the researcher, draw on this discourse and make it thus situationally relevant. It is striking how strong the children's reaction is – even of the 3-year-old Faraj when he says "But I learn!" We can assume that learning German is an important motivation for migrant parents to send their children to the daycare center. The children however actively reproduce this notion by defining the center as a place where German is the accepted norm. Other languages appear as deviations from this norm and their usage has to be explained or justified. We can, however, also detect the varied linguistic competencies that the children bring into this setting, for example in the case of

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[11] The examples drawn from my ethnographic data are thus not to be understood as 'accurate' accounts of children's realities but as narrative (re)constructions based on my own selective and subjective observations and documentations (see also the literature on field notes, for example Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995).

Muna who not only speaks German and Arabic in this vignette but also uses nonverbal communication to address the seemingly uncomprehending Faraj (when she points to her mouth and asks "Why don't you speak like this?").

There are however also children who regularly and proudly present their non-German language skills to their peers. This also seems to depend on the children's popularity as well as what languages are at stake. I often watched two of the rather popular girls, Benedetta and Melinda, proudly demonstrating to the other kids how they could count to ten in Italian and Croatian, respectively. Here, the ability to speak other languages than German is valued positively and shared with others. It gives them a sense of competency and is used as a resource in social interactions.

Finally, the children's ways of dealing with the multiplicity of languages they bring into and find in the daycare context are very complex and multifaceted. They depend on the situational context, the actors involved and their respective practical intentions. Because of the entanglement of language and identity (as for example when Muna asks Faraj "Are you Arab, too?") the speaking of a certain language becomes also a question of belonging and self-perception. Speaking the family language can be seen as a positive competency, as a way to bridge the distance between family and home, but it can also be seen as a burden, as something that separates and sets them apart from other children (and adults).

Another aspect of ethnified identity constructions that was often brought up as an issue by the children was their physical appearance. Surprising to me, hair color was quite an important attribute to define and also to exclude others. At times, for example, they associated black hair color and ethnic denominators to describe other children (like: "I know a Turkish boy. He has black hair."). Once, the girls did a voting at the painting table asking "Everybody who has blond hair raises the hand!" All but two girls, Hadija and Leila, raised their hands. When another girl, Natalya, said "I don't have blond hair. I've brown hair." her friend Melinda argued "No, you have blond hair, too." So hair color can be used to demarcate and to exclude others as well as to form alliances[12]. It is, however, not seen as a static, clear-cut attribute but is open to negotiation, as it is also the case in the following interview abstract, when Clara draws a picture of herself and Leila and comments on it.

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[12] This kind of using a rather arbitrary criterion to define the situation and to draw boundaries between groups of children that are constructed as opposites and also involve implicit evaluations is what Barrie Thorne (1993) has described with the term 'borderwork'.

Interview with Clara and Leila:	
Clara: You have, you have stinky-stinky, Leila. […] Leila, this is you! *(she points to the right figure)*	Clara: No, it's you!
	Leila: It's you!
	Clara: *(turning to me)* Claudia, she *has* black hair!
Leila: And why do I have tiptoe?	Leila: Nooo!
Clara: What?	Clara: Yes!
Leila: Why do I have *this*?	Leila: Noo!
Clara: […] you must have stinky feet.	Me: Hm, then what is the color of your hair Leila?
Leila: Ieh, but I don't want stinky. Where are my socks?	Leila: I have *blue* only.
	Me: Blue?
Clara: Yes, and these are your fingers *(she draws the fingers in red and counts along)*, a one and a two and a three and a four and a five and a six and a seven and a eight and a nine and a ten and/	Clara: Nooo, that's *not true*.
	Leila: It is blue.
	Me: Maybe brown?
	Leila: It's blue.
	Clara: Nooo.
Leila: This is you!	Leila: Yes.
Clara: No, it's *you*!	Clara: But as I like. She *has*!
Leila: No, you.	Leila: I am *this (points to the left figure)* and that is you *(the right figure)*.
Clara: But I want it *so. (looking at me)*	Clara: Nope, this is me *(the left one)*.
Me: You can draw as you like.	Leila: This is you *(the right one)*.
Leila: I want, I don't want to be *this*.	Clara: Then I make it *also* with black hair *(starts painting the left figure with black hair)*.
Clara: But as I *like*!	
Leila: But I look *gross*!	Leila: *(loud) No*!
Clara: Yes, but one can look gross, because you have also this *(she points to Leila's eyebrow where she earlier accidentally colored herself)*. And you have *black hair*, so I make it black, too.	Clara: Yes, this is *me*. This is me now, with black hair.
	Leila: Ieh, this is *you (the right one)*!
	Clara: No, this is *me (the left one)*. […]
	Leila: I *don't want* to be the gross one.
Leila: *(startled)* Ha, *no*! Not black!	Clara: What do you *want*?
Clara: *(loud)* Man, she *has* black!	Leila: I want to be this *(the left one)*.
Leila: I have not black!	Clara: No, this is *me*! Clau/
Clara: Yes you have! *(she draws the right figure with black hair)*	Leila: Ok, then I'm the heart *(points to the little heart in the middle between the two figures)*.
Leila: No! No, no, no, no. *No!*	Clara: Ok, you're the heart. Shall I make it nice for you?
Clara: You have black hair. […]	
Leila: *(a bit whiny-voiced)* Don't make it black. This is *you*!	Leila: Yes. *(and in a louder voice)* But *no* black!
	Clara: Ok. You get a little one.

Black hair color, as Clara uses it here to depict Leila, is clearly embedded in a negative, evaluative context (e.g., "stinky", "gross"). Leila, however, not simply accepts this stereotyped ascription but actively resists it. By constructing herself as blue haired she asserts her agency and her power to define her own identity. During this negotiation Clara also moves away from her initial position and draws herself with black hair. Finally she draws a new figure for Leila so that both of them are content. We can see how phantasy plays an important role in the children's situational and context-dependent identity negotiations. The general negative connotation of black hair, however, is not altered in this example. So, while aspects of the children's physical appearance do not form a stable part of their identity constructions but rather can vary in their relevance according to the situation, they are apparently aware of a general hierarchical and judgmental scheme of perception in their surrounding social world that they can draw upon and use in concrete interactions to build alliances as well as exclusions.

The last empirical example shall illustrate how children come to consider the different national origins of their respective families in their interactions. Most, if not all of them are born and raised in Germany and only know their parents' country of origin from hearsay or from vacations. Nevertheless, they sometimes identify themselves and others with these national origins. For example a boy told me about his friend who was not in the center and explained "He is also Bosnian." Or Hadija once came up to me saying "We're Arab." When I asked her

what I would be, she said "German" and then "Just fun, we're German, too." Thus, it is not that clear for the children whether they identify as 'German', 'Other' or as both. Again, it depends on the situation and context.

Interview with Marie, Benedetta and Selim:		Me:	(to Benedetta) And was it nice there?
Me:	So what do you like playing? (addressing Marie) What is your fav/	Benedetta:	Green and (looking for a pen) red, red, red, red, here. Yes. Wait, I paint this greeeeen.
Marie:	Hm, I like playing … hm, I like playing bathing.	Me:	And Selim, did you like it when you were in Turkey?
Me:	Bathing?	Selim:	Yeah. Shall I show you how Turkey goes? (he draws a red rectangle) Turkey goes/ Is there also a white pen?
Benedetta:	Me too!		
Selim:	Me too!	Me:	(I point to the paper) Yes, that's white. (he looks at me questioningly) No white pen, you just have to leave it blank then.
Me:	Yeah, that's fun.		
Marie:	And I like sun!		
Benedetta:	Me too!	Selim:	Oh man!
Selim:	Me too.	Benedetta:	Look, Italy! Iiiiitaly. (I giggle a bit)
Marie:	And I *like* … going on vacation.	Marie:	Iiiiitaly.
Benedetta:	Me too!	Benedetta:	Italy, it's mine. […]
Selim:	Me too.	Selim:	Here, Turkey! I've made Turkey. (he now has used the light-rose pen to draw the sickle moon and the star)
Me:	And where do you like to go on vacation?		
Marie:	Erm, this week, when the sun is shining very, very much, and when it is summer, then I go to (louder) France!		
		Me:	Hmm, and what's that? (pointing to the house below the flag)
Me:	Have you been there before?	Selim:	That here? (keeps on explaining the flag) It goes like this and like this – Turkey.
Benedetta:	But I have been to *Italy*.		
Selim:	And I go to Turkey!		
Marie:	(to Selim) But you *are* Turkey!		
Benedetta:	But I was … Look! Italy goes like that. (she starts drawing the Italian flag)		

Marie takes the lead in this conversation while the others just agree with her and take over the topic of vacation. While Marie doesn't react to her friend Benedetta's statement about her vacation in Italy she strongly reacts to Selim who has been bothering and provoking her throughout this interview. She identifies him with this other country ("But you *are* Turkey!") which could be interpreted as an attempt to exclude him. Marie here is in the position to 'mark' the Other without being marked herself. Selim at first does not even react to this ascription. Only when Benedetta starts to draw the Italian flag does he himself begin drawing the Turkish flag[13]. Benedetta appears in a more active role here, vividly embracing and appropriating her Italian identity and also defending it against Marie's intrusion ("Italy, it's mine.").

The children, however, do not identify themselves and others consistently and continuously in ethnic terms. I picked these examples because of my theoretical interest in the children's constructions of ethnicity. By and large I had the impression that these issues were rather seldom explicitly brought up and that other aspects of their developing identity constructions were much more important to them – especially gender-related matters. But still, the ethnographic observations show that children do possess a certain practical knowledge about the social relevance and valuation of ethnicity and that they can actively draw on, expand and experiment with it in their everyday peer interactions.

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[13] There has been the soccer world championship in Berlin in the summer right before my research took place and the center is situated quite near the so-called 'fan-mile', so I assume the children encountered a lot of flags during that time and also had some artistic activities on that theme. Actually, I observed the children quite often drawing flags during free play (especially some of them, like Benedetta for example).

V. Conclusions

To better contextualize my interpretations and findings it is important to challenge a narrow, essentialist understanding of 'children's perspectives'. As ethnographer I do not just discover 'facts' but take an active role in the construction of meaning. Researchers do not reconstruct participants' views in an objective way, but interpret and analyze their expressions according to their own theoretical and biographical background. Accordingly, the insights have to be seen in light of this context.

> Instead of a naïve realist approach which assumes that we – the adult researchers – 'really' adopt the children's perspective, see their world through the 'children's eyes' and speak with 'the children's voice', it has to be marked much more clearly 'who speaks'. (Mey 2003: 23)

Thus, there is not the one *'authentic'* voice or perspective of children. Their positionings and forms of expression are always embedded in shifting social, cultural, historical, and biographical contexts and are therefore never simple and fixed (Warming 2005: 53). Consequently, our understanding of children's views is not 'reproductive' in the sense of a correct or final representation of some action and its meaning. Rather, understanding is synonymous with interpretation; it leaves room for plurality, negotiation, and change. My representation of the children's experiences is on the one hand bound to my own perspective and on the other hand results from my interactions with the research participants in the field as well as my exchanges with colleagues, friends etc. (see Graue & Walsh 1998). The search for meaning is a (co-) constructive and dialogical process, revealing different viewpoints rather than claiming the 'whole truth'.

The concept of ethnicity as I have introduced it here is not experienced by the children (nor by adults) in its abstract social theoretical sense. They have no elaborated or consciously reflected opinion on it that could be easily articulated. Rather, ethnicity gains its importance in concrete interactions. Thus, despite (or rather due to) its being socially constructed, it yields real effects in everyday practice. Concrete issues that are at stake in children's everyday interactions are for example their diverse family languages, their different physical appearances or the national origins of their families. As I have shown, the children's dealing with these issues can be very variable and multifaceted. It is me as the researcher who connects these instances to my theoretical understanding of ethnicity as a category of social differentiation embedded in power relations and politics of representation. Children do not necessarily position themselves consciously in these value-laden discourses, but they *practically* relate to them in concrete interactions. Through my analyses and interpretations I tried to show how these situational positionings can be seen to reproduce as well as challenge existing social power relations and representations.

While children's opportunities for action and reflection may be institutionally and developmentally more limited than those of adults, my observations have shown how they dispose of a range of strategies and possible courses of action. For example they can perceive of their multilingual skills as a positive competency and use it as a resource in their social interactions. They can in certain situations problematize German as a standard language and adapt to or challenge this norm. They use aspects of ethnic identity to situationally define themselves and others, to in- and exclude, to build up alliances or gain control over the interaction. They negotiate about the definition and valuation of ethnifying ascriptions, and in the course

of these negotiations reproduce stereotypical views or rework and reinterpret them creatively and with the use of phantasy to build up alternative representations and identity constructions.

The children's *peer culture* in the daycare center thus emerges as an important context where children come to negotiate and deal with socially relevant aspects of ethnic identity, and where they actively appropriate and creatively experiment with these constructions. This again underlines the importance of situational context, social interaction among peers and children's active participation in processes of acquiring social knowledge. The children's opportunities for action are however embedded in and restricted by socially mediated regimes of meaning and representation, by dominant and normalizing value hierarchies. *Ethnifying* as a practice of situationally putting forth ethnicity as a relevant factor in the interaction thus goes *beyond* a 'situated practice'. It only derives its potential to define and affect the situation because it relates to socially relevant and discursively rooted patterns of classification and evaluation that provide for its seeming plausibility and connectivity to communication (cf. Mecheril 2004: 47). But the children I observed not just passively imitated or mechanically reproduced these patterns. Rather, they were practically involved in their active accomplishment, while at the same time they also experimented with alternative options of perception, thought and action. They were thus actually *doing ethnicity* (see Diehm & Kuhn 2005, 2006).

> Everyday discourse provides children with reasons for why racial and ethnic distinctions are important and when they can reasonably be included as justifications for social action. The social toolbox is wide open and ready for children to use as their skills develop. When the nature of everyday discourse and practice is laden with racial-ethnic meanings, children, too, will make practical use of that discourse in everyday life. (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001: 196)

Here it is important to reflect on the nature of societal influences on children's interactions and everyday practices in general. Children encounter a range of influences in a variety of contexts (family, daycare, media, neighborhood etc.) and have to actively cope with them. In the course of their developing identity constructions, they come to creatively experiment with different norms and ways to structure their social worlds. Again, phantasy, role play, and peer interactions figure as very important in this process. When I observed the children using ethnifying ascriptions and concepts this does not imply that these concepts would be a stable part of their identity constructions and world view. In light of my ethnographic data I rather assume that young children already dispose of a certain practical (or *embodied*, see Lappalainen 2009) knowledge about these categorizations and their social valuation and that they can use this knowledge according to the practical context and their situational intentions. In other situations it may not be important at all or interfering with other social categorizations. So, ethnicity is not to be understood as a decontextualized, cross-situational feature of children's social reasoning, but rather an *instrument* or a *social tool* that children actively and creatively use in specific contexts (see Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). They use this knowledge to initiate interaction and form social bonds, as well as to construct a notion of 'the Other' and define themselves in relation to that 'Other'. This highlights the *relationality* of identity constructions. People (not just children) construct their identities, their concepts of 'Self' in interaction with others in social contexts, which involves aspects of belonging and connectedness as well as distancing and drawing boundaries. Problematic, however, is the often implicated devaluation, stereotyping and alienation of those who are constructed as 'Other' – or the self-alienation if one comes to perceive of oneself as 'Other'. On the other hand, these excluding and distancing constructions can always be broke open and renegotiated in concrete interactions –

for example they can be set irrelevant by changing the definition of the situation or putting forth other categories as more important. From a broader social theoretical perspective the wide range of children's practical dealings with ethnicity can thus be interpreted along a continuum from reproducing to challenging dominant constructions of belonging and 'the Other'. This interpretive perspective supports a view of children as competent social actors and at the same time points to the relationality, provisionality and context-dependence of children's identities.

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