

Ethical, Methodological, and Practical Reflections When Using Q Methodology in Research with Young Children

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Abstract. *The objective of this discussion is to raise ethical, methodological, and practical issues concerning research with young children and the use of Q methodology through our experiences with a study of young children's feelings when in situations related to parental divorce. Q methodology was applied with 20 visual statements depicting a range of feelings for five-year-old children from Norwegian daycare centers to sort according to a "How do you generally feel?" condition of instruction. The issues resulting from this work are ethical considerations, methodological reflections, and practical concerns.*

Introduction

Divorce is a continued concern of family well-being in many cultures (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). The perspectives among researchers regarding children's adjustment to divorce are nuanced and complex (Kelly, 2003; Kelly & Emory, 2003). Despite the fact that Norwegian divorce rates have declined somewhat from 2001 to 2008, the total number of divorces is still high (Statistics Norway, 2010). It is expected that 24 percent of all marriages in Norway may end in divorce as early as within the first 10 years of marriage (Statistics Norway, 2004). There are increasing numbers of childbirths among unmarried and/or cohabiting couples (Jensen & Clausen, 1997; Kiernan, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). In Norway cohabitation is both an accepted and a quite common way of living (Noack, 2001). High numbers of cohabitating parents place children at an even higher risk of experiencing parental separation due to elevated dissolution rates in these families (Jensen & Clausen, 1997; Manning, Smock & Majumdar, 2004). This indicates that many young children experience divorce or cohabitation separation between their parents.

Child Response to Divorce

Several studies show that older children and adolescents who have

experienced parental divorce or separation are at increased risk of psychosocial adjustment problems such as anxiety and depression, conduct problems, and school related problems (e.g. Amato, 2001; Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, De Winter, & Verhulst, 2008; Størksen, Røysamb, Holmen, & Tambs, 2006; Størksen, Røysamb, Moum, & Tambs, 2005). Flowerdew and Neale (2003) suggest taking into account other changes besides divorce that take place in children's lives and influence well-being. Although children may feel distressed and experience stressors that increase the risk of psychological problems, on the average, many children function competently after divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1996). Although many children are resilient to the stressors of divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003), some children seem to suffer from this experience throughout their lives (Amato, 2000).

While the main focus of the research on children after divorce has been on older children and adolescents (Leon, 2003), some studies indicate that young children may show a wide range of reactions and psychological symptoms related to divorce, such as behavioral and emotional problems (Cheng, Dunn, O'Connor, & Golding, 2006), and an insecure attachment (Nair & Murray, 2005). Being separated from a parent for any reason can be associated with learning difficulties and pre-literacy problems among children at entrance to kindergarten (Jee, et al., 2008). Another study revealed that children who experienced parental divorce before they reached the age of six displayed more behavioral problems than their peers whose parents divorced when they had reached an older age (Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 1997).

The aim of the study related to this discussion was to explore the emotions and current feelings among 37 five-year-old children in everyday settings in daycare and home environments. Both children with divorced or separated parents and children from intact families were included. Q methodology with visual statements or images within the Q sample was applied with the intent to allow the young children to express their feelings at the time. The results of the study are presented elsewhere (Størksen, Thorsen, Øverland, & Brown, submitted; Størksen & Thorsen, 2009). However, a summary of the findings is relevant to this discussion of ethical, methodological, and practical issues related to conducting such a study with very young children. The children's Q sorts revealed several views. The main and dominant view, as expected, was one expressing many positive feelings. Two other views were characterized by more mixed feelings. The dominant view is in line with several studies pointing to children's resilience and ability to cope with changes after parental divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1996; Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Kelly, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The children from

divorced or separated families expressed more difficult feelings than the other children. Still, some children with divorced parents expressed no difficult feelings. The factors/views containing mixed feelings did not resemble any known diagnosis or term for child adjustment. Therefore the study revealed that the children's views on their own adjustment and feelings might not so easily be captured by scales or clinical diagnoses that researchers normally use. See Størksen, Thorsen, Øverland, and Brown (submitted) for further descriptions of results. Due to a limited sample size these findings cannot be generalized to the total population of Norwegian five-year-old children. Yet, the exploration of children's feelings after divorce led to important discoveries.

The Importance of Child-Centered Research

Childhood is relative to time and context (Nilsen, 2005). A trend over decades and across disciplines has evolved from viewing children as immature, incomplete, and unreliable respondents to seeking and valuing children's viewpoints (Freeman & Mathinson, 2009). Research has treated the child as object, subject, social actor, and more recently, as a participant and co-researcher (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Kellett, 2005). The newer shifts in focus stress the importance of viewing children as active social agents in their own lives (Emond, 2006; Greene, 2006). Many of the articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989) concern respecting and including children. An example of this is article 12 that focuses on children's right to express their views on all matters that affect them, which has an impact on the concept of childhood today. Only the child can provide his or her view from his or her personal subjective standpoint.

Traditional developmental psychology has been criticized for being more concerned with valid and reliable child variables and their scientific status than with children themselves (Greene, 2006). Greene (2006) calls attention to four ways of taking account of children's views in research: (1) entailing respect for and interest in children's lives as they themselves experience their lives, (2) acknowledging children as active agents in constructing their own life stories and influencing their worlds, (3) finding means to uncover children's own perspectives, and (4) paying attention to children's response to and interpretation of being studied and being the focus of research. This approach can be complementary to traditional research approaches in developmental psychology.

Ways to Include Young Children in Sensitive Research

Among children aged six years and younger, it is common to ask teachers or parents to supply data on child adjustment (e.g. Mathiesen,

Sanson, Stoolmiller, & Karevold, 2009). There are some exceptions, such as a child interview-scale (The Berkeley Puppet Interview or BPI) that has been applied in studies with very young children (Arseneault, Kim-Cohen, Taylor, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2005; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998). However, the BPI is a scale predefined by the researchers.

Parental divorce is a sensitive research theme. Conflict, frustration, anger, and guilt are some of the emotions that may characterize the couple in the period before, during, and after a divorce. When the couple includes a parent of one or more children, the situation can become even more complicated. Conflicting and confusing feelings in a child from a troubled family situation may intrude upon his or her relationships and interaction with others in their daily life, such as daycare staff and peers. In this way different parts in an ecological system interact and affect the whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These interrelated parts can act in organized, interdependent ways and promote the adaptation or survival of the whole. Pianta (1999) stresses the influence and importance of relationships. Influence between individual, interaction, group, and socio-cultural structure can be both bidirectional and reciprocal (De Mol & Buysse, 2008; Pianta, 1999), and the interacting systems may either promote adjustment and growth or cause adjustment problems among children of divorce (Amato, 2000). The researchers enter into the ecological system surrounding the children in the study and become a small part of such a system during a limited period. The researchers interact directly with children and daycare staff, and sometimes with parents. In addition, the children's experiences and feelings are sought both individually and as part of relationships in such systems.

What a child thinks, feels, experiences, chooses to express, and how the child chooses to behave are parts of this total system. A child's voice and subjective viewpoint is not only an important aspect in research in order to give a more comprehensive understanding of different topics, but it is a right the child has (United Nations, 1989). On the other hand, the debate is centered on the contrary idea of how well five-year-old children can express their emotions and reactions from their own point of view. To ask the children directly about divorce could be far too provocative and could easily add to the children's pain and sorrow. To respect and relate to a child's possible vulnerability, to acknowledge our own involvement in the child's system as researchers, and to allow the child's view to be expressed personally, we chose instead to ask each child about general feelings in everyday life. In Q methodology we have the freedom to choose a condition of instruction for sorting the cards that complies with this line of reasoning.

From the literature it is known that by the age of three years children display a wide and differentiated range of human emotions (Lewis,

2000), and children begin to express and report on their own and other people's feelings almost as soon as they are able to talk (Harris, 2000). Furthermore, studies conducted by Harris et al. (see Harris, 2000) reveal advancing knowledge of emotions by age and that children aged four to five years understand and report advanced concepts such as desires, beliefs, and expectations and understand emotions related to the mismatch between such concepts. In addition, very young children can take a self-referent perspective, e.g. children aged three or four can communicate with pictures from numerous children's picture books not only in an informative way such as "that's a teddy," but from a self-referent perspective as "that's *my* teddy" (Stephenson, 1980, p. 883).

A study that focuses on young children's personal experiences related to parental divorce or separation may be useful when tailoring interventions in daycare for this group of children. An important issue is how to collect such data concerning children's subjectivity and lived experience in a manner that secures respect, consideration, and the rights of the child to be protected. A snapshot of a child's feelings has the potential to represent a totality of the child's lived experience.

Introduction to the Ethical Debate

There are ethical guidelines for research used actively in large parts of the world today, such as The Declaration of Helsinki (WMA General Assembly, 2008). In such guidelines, informed consent is essential and the ethical responsibility for the research falls to the researcher. Societies' needs for new knowledge can never justify unnecessary harm or risk to research subjects. The Declaration of Helsinki has a strong focus on vulnerable groups, but at the same time, allows research with individuals or groups that need special protection. Lack of relevant knowledge reduces the quality of treatment or intervention and can pose a risk in itself for vulnerable individuals. In such circumstances, the necessity for research may in some cases justify research projects that can cause some strain for the participants (Førde, 2009).

There are three main frameworks in professional ethics: The *duty* perspective concerns justice, respect, and the duty to do no harm. The *rights* perspective is focused on the researchers' respect of the participants' rights. Through the *harm and benefit* perspective one analyzes the effects of research with the goal of minimizing harm and increasing benefit. Each framework has strengths and limitations (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Ethical questions concerning research and children are being debated from two directions, one pointing to regulations and codes of research ethics and formulation of ethical guidelines, and the other with emphasis on the researcher's individual responsibility and personal skills. It is argued that both guidelines and individual responsibility are necessary (Christensen & Prout, 2002).

Children need to be seen and respected as the young people they are and not unduly exploited. It is important to meet children at an appropriate cognitive level. One way of dealing with these issues may be to use a Q-sorting process and visual images.

In view of ethical guidelines, there are certain general principles and rules to take into account (Kent, 2000). *Autonomy* concerns the right a person has to participate in research or to decline. Therefore an informed consent is necessary either from participating respondents or from parents or guardians of children younger than 18 years. *Beneficence* concerns the obligation to do good to help others. It points to researchers' goals and justifications for doing their research. The *non-maleficence* principle has to do with the obligation of not exposing people to unnecessary harm or risk through hazardous experiments or interventions. The *justice* principle entitles people to be treated fairly.

Kent points to four rules that are more specific such as *veracity*, or telling the truth, and not withholding important information about the study when seeking potential respondents or conducting the research. This rule regulates against deception. *Privacy* concerns the respect for limited access to a person. The rule of *confidentiality* gives a person the right to control personal information and to be ensured anonymity. *Fidelity* relates to keeping promises, e.g. the number of implicit promises that researchers often make when engaging in a research project, and not engaging in fraud. Social science research builds on trust that researchers will honestly and openly collect information and report their findings (Kent, 2000).

Ethical frameworks, principles, and rules are helpful in understanding and reflecting upon dilemmas and difficulties encountered in research. For example, there can be different challenges connected to quantitative and qualitative research traditions to guarantee anonymity. With large data sets and methods of analyses with the aim of generalizing, it can be easier to conceal individuals compared to small data sets where there is more focus on meticulous descriptions, nuances, and details. To ensure anonymity of individuals, groups, or institutions in the research report or presentation, certain aspects may have to be left out, and this may sometimes weaken the results (Alver & Øyen, 1997).

In addition to these ethical guidelines, a researcher needs to develop a continuous sensitive and flexible approach in research practice. Christensen and Prout (2002) point out as vital elements the notion of an ethical symmetry between adults and children and a critical appreciation of the social position children have. For a researcher to take responsibility in such cases "means entering a dialogue that recognizes commonality but also honours difference" (Christensen &

Prout, 2002, p. 480). This points to the necessity of choosing the condition of instruction in a child Q study on a sensitive topic with great thought and consideration in order to balance between protecting the child and at the same time allowing access to important information.

Relevant differences between children and adults in relation to research concern ability and power (Hill, 2005). A child's ability to verbally express him or herself and relate to abstract ideas is obviously different from an adult's ability, but children vary greatly in their development at any given age. In our study we used pictures for the children to sort, since this is a medium they generally are acquainted with and can easily relate to, being more or less mature as a five-year-old. It is necessary, however, for a researcher in dialogue with a child to adapt his or her language to comply with the child's development.

Adults generally have authority over children. This may result in children finding it difficult to disagree or to do or say things they fear may be unacceptable. Some children have little experience in being asked about their views and can feel that their opinions are disregarded by important adults such as parents, teachers and others (Cloke, 1997). On the other hand, it would be an oversimplification to propose that researchers have all the power and respondents have none, even if they are children (Humphries & Martin, 2000). Those of us who have interacted with children in work relations and research situations are sometimes struck by children's competence and ability to convey their will, thoughts, and feelings. In any case, the interpersonal style adopted by researchers and research settings should have as a goal to reduce and not reinforce children's inhibitions and desire to please (Hill, 2005).

There are several similarities between adults and children. Both can feel incompetent or powerless. The language and status of researchers can be experienced as intimidating. A feeling of incompetence or powerlessness can be related to characteristics of the respondent, such as learning difficulties. On the other hand, both children and adults are the best informed when it comes to their own lives and cultures. Both have similar rights to be informed of the nature and purpose of the research, intentions behind it, that it is worthwhile, and to know what happens with the results. Both groups may need to be motivated to participate. In many ways the similarities between children and adults are greater than the differences, although sometimes moderations are required for children (Hill, 2005). One example is the consent from parents for their child to participate in a research project. A goal for researchers when including children in their research is according to Christensen and Prout (2002):

to develop a set of strategic ethical values that can give researchers the flexibility to meet the very varied circumstances

of research that they may encounter while also providing an anchor for their practice (p. 495).

These ethical guidelines apply independently of which research method one chooses to use. However, it is essential to use a research method that is suitable for the topic in mind and acceptable for the respondents of interest.

Ethical Choices

In this project we gave information about the study and sought consent at different levels and in relation to different actors. Applications for ethical approval were submitted to The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) and to The National Committees for Research Ethics (REK) in Norway. The approval from NSD came swiftly, but effort was needed to get the approval from REK. There should be high standards for ethical approval, especially in research with children. Among other things, we were asked to be more precise in our written information to the parents, which points to the veracity rule of not withholding important information. It was essential to have an impartial review of our study to be sure we met the necessary requirements. On the other hand, it took quite a long time before the study was finally approved. However, the general knowledge of Q in Norway at this point was quite limited, and this could be a plausible reason for the delay. We believe that a growing knowledge of Q methodology in Norway will result in smoother review processes for future Q studies.

The recruitment process was conducted like this: We contacted the directors of the daycare centers from two municipalities in Norway, informed them of the study, and asked if they were interested in participating. Their responsibility would be to hand out our written information to the parents, collect the permissions, and to inform us of which parents were willing to let their children participate in our study. This way informed consent was gathered from parents in a sensitive and trusting manner. In cases where both parents agreed, the child was included in the study. Parents were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason, thus complying with the autonomy principle.

It may be controversial if this way of recruiting children to the study is biased. Although we do not have documentation on the issue, it seemed to us in our practice of data collection it was easier to recruit children from families where the parents were living together. Some families in the process of divorce may not want their children to participate due to possible additional emotional distress. We may therefore have obtained permission mainly from families who see themselves as well-functioning. This may have resulted in an underestimation of the true problems related to divorce. However, our

goal is not to generalize results but to seek insight into some children's feelings and experiences in their everyday life through the process of sorting visual images.

We chose to spend some time with each child before the Q sorting in order to get acquainted and to help the children feel comfortable with us. During this period the children were informed verbally of the study, and of confidentiality, and asked if they were willing to participate. They were given the possibility to withdraw at any time. We were very conscious of using language relevant and easy to understand for five-year-old children.

A professional psychologist or a professional within the field of special education conducted the sorting procedure together with each child in a designated room in the daycare center to ensure privacy. Although the children were informed about the study and were asked whether they were willing to participate, it is hard for adults to really know whether or not their consent was due to an experience of pressure from adults in the situation. This might be a question for which we will never have a full answer. However, it is our sincere impression that the children that participated enjoyed the task and felt comfortable in the situation. Still, some children seemed to become quite tired just from the exercise of looking at and talking about the twenty cards. At the point before the actual Q sort had started, some of the children asked, "Are we finished now? Can we go now?" Our interpretation of their questions was that the children were tired, and eager to go back to play. Also, this session of looking through the cards had some kind of natural start and end (from card one to twenty), and we did not find it strange that some of the children thought the whole session was over. Therefore we simply replied: "No, we are not finished yet. Now we are going to put all the cards into this grid." Subsequently, we continued to explain the Q sort, and we engaged the children in the last activity. However, reflecting in retrospect, we cannot be quite sure whether these comments from a few children meant that these children really wanted to withdraw from the data-collection session.

We had an idea that sensitive feelings related to parental divorce could be easier to express obliquely through Q sorts about current feelings rather than through direct verbalization, and generally our experience seemed to confirm this. Our impression was that the illustrations on the cards were appealing and enjoyable for the children to work with. However, some of the cards related to difficult feelings such as anger, sorrow, and anxiety. Time was scheduled for debriefing after the Q sorting with each child in case difficult feelings were evoked in the situation. In this period the child could choose to play a game, do a drawing, or just talk with us. In a few cases it was necessary to actively help the children to defocus and overcome difficult feelings and to draw

their attention to games or drawing. The children gave us the impression that they enjoyed the attention they got from us. In addition, they seemed quite proud when we thanked them for helping us and providing us with important information in our study. Our professional background and communication skills were important during the entire Q-sorting process, which was tape-recorded to help us in our interpretation of the results. All information was handled with strict confidentiality. Only parents were allowed to receive information about their children or contact us if they were concerned of any emotional reactions the children might have in connection to the study. This was recommended by REK since we were dealing with such young children.

Although we had given much consideration to comply with high ethical research standards, we encountered some dilemmas. There was a dilemma related to the time available to help children that were in need of further assistance. In cases where we discovered that the children were suffering or had special needs, we were in contact with the parents after the data-collection to ensure that the parents were aware of the situation, and that appropriate interventions were taken.

Another dilemma concerned confidentiality. Both children and parents were guaranteed confidentiality, and we were not giving daycare staff access to any study information. In one case, parents preferred that a member of the staff be present during the Q-sorting procedure. We viewed the wish for having a staff member present as an example where parents can use their right to free us from confidentiality limitations for what they believe to be the good of their child. However, having a third person present changes the setting and can influence how the child responds in the situation. Pianta (1999) sees the child as a system in him or herself that interacts with other systems. The example mentioned above points to the reciprocal influence of actors in different systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Although we thought we had considered just about every possible thing that could happen, situations occurred that we had not anticipated. The dilemmas mentioned here are examples that had to be discussed by the researchers in order to do our best in relation to the children who participated in our study. These issues call attention to our personal responsibilities and skills (Christensen & Prout, 2002) in our communication and interaction with children, parents, and staff.

Methodological Reflections

In research, much attention is often given to describe the method used in research, while considerably less attention is given the rationale for choosing the specific method. Furthermore, it is rather seldom that reviews of strengths and weaknesses of the method, including practical and ethical problems stemming from its use, are seen (Greene & Hogan,

2005). Here we provide the rationale for how Q methodology respects the dignity of the child, and allows the subjective and tacit perception to be documented.

The relative lack of research focused on the adjustment of younger children (birth to six years) after parental divorce (Leon, 2003) might be related to several methodological challenges. In such sensitive topics, teachers or parents often give reports of personal adjustment among young children because children this age are normally not capable of filling in questionnaires or attending to time-consuming qualitative interviews concerning their adjustment to the divorce or separation. Furthermore, their conceptual understanding is limited by development and age. However, children are accustomed to drawings and pictures of everyday situations. They often see and interpret expressions of emotions and reactions among children in child literature and their own artistic endeavors. Therefore, to explore emotions and reactions among five-year-old children, we chose to use visual images and the Q-sorting procedure. In quantitative measures and analysis specific viewpoints and nuances may become obscured in mean averages. Since the children's subjective experiences are an essential aspect in our study of children's emotions and reactions to parental divorce and separation, we therefore chose to use Q methodology in which subtleties become explicit and where commonalities and diversities emerge.

Since theory is incorporated into the Q sample in Q methodology, we need not ask direct questions such as "what are your feelings to your parents' divorce?" Instead we can include important aspects related to feelings and reactions to divorce into the Q sample and ask the children to sort the cards according to how they usually feel. Each statement or image in the Q sample is first looked at separately by the respondent, thereafter and more essentially, viewed in relation to all of the other statements or images. Through this process subjects provide their understanding (Stephenson, 1963) and their meanings and feelings are made explicit and quantified through correlation and Q-factor analysis. This is the case in the present study as well. Children participate in defining a factor and thus share a common view. The different factors represent various views and feelings. The configurations of the Q-sample images give us insight into the children's feelings and lived experience. By giving children with divorced or separated parents a specific code in the analysis, the factor loadings can reveal on which factors these children have high loadings.

In theory we believed Q method to be an avenue in response to methodological issues for studying very young children. Yet, it is important to abide by the philosophy behind the methodology to ensure this (Thorsen, 2006, 2009), e.g. that subjectivity is communicable through structured statements which are equally probable a priori and

drawn from a concourse, can be shared by sorting these statements or pictures from a self-referential point of view, and then analyzed through statistical procedures. To define the present concourse, we used findings from studies of older children of divorce and previous studies of younger children of divorce where parents or other caregivers have typically been the main informants. After controlling for overlap between identified reactions or feelings, a total of 31 subjective reactions or feelings were identified in the concourse. The reactions or feelings were converted to subjective statements in a straightforward language that would be suitable for adapting the statements into visual cards with various feelings and reactions. We did not want to impose on the children by asking them directly about parental separation. Two main dimensions with two sub-topics were identified in the field, and the Fisher balanced-block design (Stephenson, 1993/1994) was set up in accordance to these four categories (see Table1).

Table 1. Block Design for the Q Sample

	<i>Inter-individual</i>	<i>Intra-individual</i>
Well-adjusted	I feel close to my mother (14) I feel close to my father (18) Daycare personnel help and support me (12) I have many friends in day care (13) My extended family loves me (4)	I have fun in daycare (6) I believe my parents collaborate well (8) I am happy and satisfied (7) I enjoy food (1) I play and have fun (15)
Adjustment problems	There is a lot of conflict in my house (17) My mother is sad and I have to comfort her (20) My father is sad and I have to comfort him (3) I feel lonely / isolated from others (9) I often end up in conflict with other children (19)	I am anxious/scared/afraid (5) I am noisy (11) It is my fault (2) I feel angry (16) I am sad and I cry (10)

Note: Statement number in brackets

In view of children's developmental stage, we chose to restrict our present Q sample to twenty statements. We picked five representative statements for each of the four categories. A professional designer expressed each reaction or feeling as visual illustrations on individual cards, which were randomly numbered. A child with androgynous looks was designed as the main character of all the cards (see Appendix). Our intent behind this act was to do our best to ensure that both girls

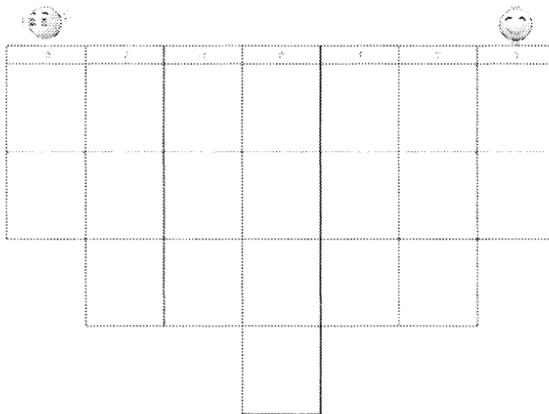
and boys could identify with and relate to the main character in the cards. Each of the 20 cards illustrated the main topic of the statements. After piloting the cards through Q sorting with five children, we adjusted some of the cards that had excessive or distracting details or that were otherwise unclear in their content. However, some might still argue that statements or illustrations can mean different things to different people, or differ for one person under varying circumstances. The statements enter into a functional-interactional situation where nothing is normative (Stephenson, 1978). We view this as one of the strengths of Q methodology to present each respondent's personal configuration of all the statements as a whole and thus reveal their subjectivity. However, two people may have almost the same configuration and still put different understandings or interpretations into the meaning of the cards that they have ranked with high or low scores. This is why recording comments made by participants and conducting post-sort interviews is recommended. In the child-study described here, we recorded comments that children made as they conducted their Q sorts. Although REK had given us permission to contact the children for follow-up interviews, our own ethical consideration prevented us from doing this. During the Q-sorting sessions with children various difficult feelings were evoked. Through discussions in our research team we decided not to contact the children again to verbally discuss the issues further. It seemed to us that the Q-sorting procedure itself could be disturbing for some of the children, and we did not want to put more pressure on them by confronting them with the themes again verbally.

Do the Q sorts conducted by the children reveal their subjectivity related to parental divorce without having specifically asked about it? First of all, we needed to know if these five-year-old children knew and could explain basic feelings. We therefore asked them to make facial expressions of various feelings such as angry, happy, sad, or afraid/anxious. All children in our study were able to make facial expressions of these feelings. We then started the Q sorting procedure, and each child was instructed: "let's pretend this is you", referring to the main character in the cards. Together with the researcher each child looked through all the 20 cards according to the arbitrary numbered order of the cards. For every card the child was asked "If we pretend this is you, how do you think you feel inside?" or "What kind of feelings do you think you have in this situation?" Initially some children got preoccupied with arbitrary details such as toys or other details in the cards. However, when asked again specifically about feelings, they were all able to recognize and report—in a simple or more advanced way—the basic feelings expressed in the cards.

The condition of instruction was to *sort the cards in a way that shows us how you usually feel*. We then showed the child the sorting grid and

spoke with him or her about the two “smiley” faces which represent “most like” and “most unlike” (see Figure 1). We explained “One face is nodding and this means the cards that are most like what you usually feel are placed here. The other face is shaking its head. Here you can put the cards that are most unlike what you usually feel.” Subsequently the child was asked to look for the two cards most like the way the child normally felt. The cards that were chosen were placed on the right-most column labeled “most like”. Likewise the child was asked to look for the two most unlike of all the cards. These cards were placed on the left-most column labeled “most unlike”. By moving back and forth in this manner it was obvious which cards gave meaning to the child by appearing most like or most unlike, and which cards that did not seem to give any specific associations for the child. Cards in this last category were placed in the middle area of the distribution grid, which ranged from +3 to -3. This way of breaking down the Q sorting to smaller parts has been utilized in previous studies with small children (Stephenson, 1980; Taylor & Delprato, 1994), and this technique made the cognitive task of Q sorting 20 cards according to seven columns (see Figure 1) manageable for the children.

Figure 1. The Distribution Grid for Sorting



The children rank-ordered all the images according to what they believed to be most like or most unlike what they normally felt. When they had finished, they were asked to look at all of the pictures the way they were placed to see if it looked like how they usually felt. Usually the children agreed with what they had done. A few children needed to rearrange the cards at this point. To ensure the children meant what they said we would point to the two cards placed under (+3) and asked “why are these cards most like how you feel?” One child answered “when I see someone I want to be with, I want to be with them and I’m

happy" (picture 4), and to the second card (picture 7) the answer was "Because it's always fun to think about what you want to do outside and inside." When asked about the two cards (pictures 11 and 16) most unlike (-3) this child answered, "When I can't be with someone, I get angry." When asked if this happens often or seldom, the child replied, "Only once in a while."

In this way the children have shared their experiences with us and this became explicit through operant factor structure. The underpinning here is "affectability" and according to Stephenson (1980) "quantification is with respect to feeling, belief, and self-reference" (p. 884). The children's active participation in the data gathering is, in our view, a huge advantage in helping us understand their world. These children gave voice to their feelings and reactions through the Q-sorting process with the twenty picture cards, thus categorizing themselves. The subjectivity the children have shown us is preserved through the Q factor analysis and the philosophy behind Q methodology. An essential aspect here is the "distensive zero", and the associated equal importance of the negative and positive poles. According to Stephenson (1974, p. 10) ". . . each Q sort is in effect reduced to *standard scores (as are all factors), whose mean is zero and standard deviation is 1.00. This is a fundamental quantum measurement, for all subjectivity*" [original italics]. In our opinion Q methodology has helped us gain access to children's feelings and reactions to parental divorce and separation.

During the child study surprising Q sorts and results were sometimes revealed. One child had almost finished the Q sorting when commenting, "There is no room for me crying on the sorting grid." As it turned out the child had previously ranked cards with sad parents with high positive values on the sorting grid.

In other cases, when parents contacted us to get more information about their children's Q sorts, they seemed to confirm the expressions that the children had made in their Q sorts. It seemed like the parents were not surprised and agreed that the children had conducted the sorting in a quite accurate way. In this study we had to rely more on the visual configurations in our interpretations than on the original statements, since it was the pictures the children were in communication with (Allgood & Kvalsund, in press) and not the statements. The recordings of children's comments were also important in the process of understanding what the children had shared with us. These experiences can give some indications that Q methodology with visual images may be an appropriate method when studying subjective experiences among young children and enable to make a variation of feelings become explicit and make meaning. More studies are needed to explore how Q methodology can reveal subjectivity among young children.

Practical Issues

In close contact between researchers and children, it is first of all important to establish a secure setting where the child can feel comfortable and well in the company of the researcher. It is necessary to think through which words to use when speaking with the child about the study, their participation, and also answer any questions the child may have. In addition both child and researcher should be able to enjoy the Q-sorting process and communication of thoughts and feelings relating to it.

Before the Q sorting it is important to check that the children in question can convey that they understand the feelings displayed in the pictures and what they mean in order to relate in an informed way when rank-ordering the pictures. In our case it was essential to focus their attention to these feelings and away from specific details in the pictures such as toys, furniture, or clothes etc. Our impression was that the children in the study in general understood the emotions portrayed through the illustrations. Yet, a few children could become distracted for example by similar numbers such as 3 and 13. It was important to have an active and affirmative dialogue with these young children to get them to refocus by asking; "Was this what you meant?" or "Is this the way you generally feel?"

A Q-sorting process puts demands on the child's ability to concentrate, and it is an advantage to have a secluded room where this can be done. Another aspect in working with children in daycare is to consider the daycare routine. A relationship between a child and a researcher takes place within a wider context, which is the natural ecological system of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995; Pianta, 1999). The child is part of and participates in routines and activities with others in daycare that might compete with time set off to the research. It is necessary to find a convenient time for the child to participate.

It was of utmost importance to give both adults and children information in a language that is easily understood. A good investment in a research project such as ours was to create a positive and respectful relationship with daycare staff. This helped smooth the data-collecting process. When the staff, trusted by children, were positive towards us this rubbed off on how the children looked upon us. Children spoke to each other, and a child who thought it was a good experience to be part of our research could talk to other more timid children and convey it was not scary but fun to participate. With this in mind the staff could help us get the more robust children to start and the more shy ones to come at a later time. Another important aspect concerning information was to prepare the children for what was to come. For example, we began by telling them that we were first going to look at twenty cards

and after that, the child would put all the cards onto the sorting grid, after which we would have completed the task.

It is usually wise not to be in a hurry with children but to meet them in general on the playground outside or in the different rooms in the daycare. It gave us a chance to answer any questions children in general might have. We could look at and comment on drawings children had done or games and play activities they were engaged in, and we could ask the children questions about the daycare center etc. This gave us a chance to connect with children as okay visitors and not as intimidating researchers.

All Q-methodology studies require effort defining the concourse and selecting the statements or pictures for the Q sample. In relation to children it is necessary to know their general developmental stage and not choose a larger Q sample than the children can handle. Our experience from this study is that 20 cards can be a reasonable number for children aged five years. For most children the number of cards seemed manageable, whilst for some 20 cards were in the upper range of what they were able to concentrate on. Twenty cards or expressions of statements is a low number in a Q study; therefore, when choosing defining Q sorts, we needed to maintain a high significance level and flagged only those sorts with $p < .01$ on one factor.

When using pictures or illustrations it is important that they are clear, appealing, and without too many details. During the elaboration and piloting of cards in the present study, we made various adjustments to avoid excessive and distracting details, for example a bottle of Coke was extracted. This made it easier for the children to concentrate on the intended content. Furthermore, we added children with different coloring to the cards in order to better represent the heterogeneous population of Norway today. The visual expression made by our illustrator turned out to be quite appealing for the young children attending in our study. They could easily relate to expressions and situations portrayed in the cards. Using a grid big enough for the children to put the cards in place was a great help in the sorting process and this could be done on a table or sitting on the floor with the child. The daycare staff we collaborated with were very helpful in making practical arrangements for the data collection in our study.

This study includes children from families where both parents are living together and from families who have experienced separation or divorce. The recruitment of children may be biased and therefore may not include enough children who have recently experienced divorce or represent homes with high levels of conflict in relation to a divorce process. Similar issues have been addressed by Emery and Forehand (1996) and Kelly and Emery (2003) pointing to small studies of highly

select samples.

Translating statements into images in a Q study may enhance ambiguity in some instances, e.g. a picture with a finger pointing at a sad child is the visual reflection of the statement "It is my fault". This was sometimes perceived by the children as "I am being scolded". On the other hand, different statements or pictures may mean different things to different people. Reliability lies in our ability to comprehend the children's understanding of the cards in the Q sample, and the reason why the children sorted the cards in the specific way that they did.

Conclusion

The focus of this discussion has been on ethical, methodological, and practical issues concerning a specific child study. There are strict rules and regulations for conducting research with humans, and we need to be duly careful with vulnerable groups such as very young children. We took care in choosing a research approach that would be lenient towards the children's vulnerability, but rigorous in gaining insight into their subjective feelings. Through Q methodology we can incorporate theory into the Q sample relative to the theme in question. Although we did not specifically ask about parental divorce or separation, we did get nuanced accounts of the children's feelings connected to their everyday life at home and in daycare. We had information from parents for children who had experienced parental separation or divorce and those who were living in families with both biological parents. In addition, there were practical issues to take into account to make the data collecting process as smooth and manageable as possible for those participating. Among several research methods, we chose to use Q methodology in this child study because it is designed to reveal subjective feelings and understanding from a self-referent standpoint, subjectivity is preserved throughout the analysis, and the child plays an active and essential part in this process. Q methodology with visual images seemed like a receptive, considerate and appropriate way to gather information from young children about their subjective views related to their lived experience in the context of parental separation and divorce.

Authors' Note

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Appendix. Visual Q-Sample: Selected Items

