



# Faceless, voiceless child – Ethics of visual anonymity in research with children and young people

Childhood  
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–16  
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DOI: 10.1177/09075682221126586  
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## Abstract

The anonymisation of research participants is a standardised ethical practice, but researchers sometimes struggle to find an ethical balance between the practice of anonymisation and participants' wishes to reveal their identities. In the Australian and Finnish studies utilising visuality, the participating asylum-seeking and refugee children and youths wished to reveal their faces and claim ownership for their work. The hindrance of this caused disappointment for the participants and inhibited them from telling their message. Unproblematised anonymisation may have unplanned consequences for children and present them not only as faceless but also as voiceless, thus leading to further ethical problems.

## Keywords

Anonymity, research ethics, visual research, young migrants, unaccompanied minor refugees

## Introduction

A picture is worth a thousand words, we thought. Hence, when presenting our respective papers at a research conference<sup>1</sup>, we included photos showing our participants. Being conscious of our ethical requirements, and as is the convention, we covered our participants'

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faces in the presentation. Despite spending countless moments contemplating research ethics, including visual representation, we did not give this a second thought. Surely the faces had to be blurred in a conference presentation to protect the privacy of our participants?

In the final panel discussion, a member commented on the concealment of children's faces in our presentations. To him, it felt false and unnecessary, as it was very unlikely that anyone in the international audience would know these children and youths from Finland and Australia. He said that he could not read the pictures without facial expressions and that looking at the faceless children made him feel disconnected to the story. The comment left us puzzled and worried. This was our standard practice of presenting our research. Did everyone we presented to – practitioners, decision-makers, academics, community members and children and youths themselves – see the images the same way as the person in the conference audience?

Pictures have the potential to evoke empathy and affective horizons in the desired audiences, but in contemporary societies, where visibility has become the 'cultural norm' (O'Hara and Higgins, 2019), the audiences' thinking is affected by not only what they see but also what is hidden. It is worth asking what information audiences lack and what presumptions they make when not allowed to see, for instance, a worried forehead, the smiling eyes or the pursed lips (Lenette and Miskovic, 2018). The acknowledgement of the potential risks of revealing participants' identities is a shared research ethical standardisation, but research ethics in situ require us to consider what kind of feelings, emotions and connotations illustrations evoke in the multiple publics we eventually engage with. In this article, we take part in the debate proposed by Spyros Spyrou (2021) in his editorial call in *Childhood* for more conscious and informed engagement with publics and within and beyond academia for rethinking our conventional modes of scholarly communication.

Blurring or pixelation is a technique that is used for hiding features in images. This practice is not purely technical – and certainly not innocent – as it reflects the culture and politics around individuals, groups, communities and environments (Spencer, 2020). In our (Western) cultural reading, the suppression of a face is commonly done to protect the identity of 'unpopular' people such as police, criminals or informers, or hide details of dubious situations and events. The hiding implies faultiness, danger, threat or suspicion (Fuggle, 2015; Lenette and Cleland, 2016). Yet this convention has been translated into research as being unproblematic. While anonymisation is about the imperative ethical statement of causing no harm, its principles of protection and privacy can also bring with them a climate of secrecy, scepticism and alienation. We argue that the vulnerabilities and risks of belonging to a marginalised group may hence be amplified by well-meaning yet unproblematised visual anonymisation.

Dale Spencer (2020) suggests that the issue of visual anonymity needs to be revisited in child studies as it is featured in a simplistic way and is detached from the cultural politics of childhood. For instance, the discussion around research ethics, and particularly that of anonymisation, has not kept pace with the increasingly visual worlds of children and young people. In their everyday worlds, it has become a common practice to share photos

and videos and connect with the ‘visual others’ locally and globally. Children’s immersion into the world of visual media causes concern among adults, but it can also level hierarchies, amplify voices and strengthen the feeling of agency among children. These issues connect the question of ‘face’ and its concealment unavoidably to qualitative research and research ethics (Spencer, 2020: 3).

The challenge of balancing between protecting children from potential harm and reinforcing their voices has been raised by many in the established participatory approach in childhood studies (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Kiili and Moilanen, 2019; Powell and Smith, 2009; Spriggs & Gillam, 2019). Usually, in participatory childhood research, albeit the common practice of using images created *by* children, the use of images *of* children is seen as ethically risky and is thus avoided. When images are used, their anonymisation is usually taken for granted, although it may be inconsistent with the preferences of the children. Anonymity may also prevent children from openly addressing wrongdoings and thus replicates the experiences of marginalisation (Gordon, 2019; Saunders et al., 2015; Wilson, 2018). We therefore ruminate whether the highly emphasised children’s right to be *heard* is enough. Should we also take more seriously their desire to be *seen*?

In this article, we call for the reconsideration of normalised practices in childhood research ethics, namely anonymisation and the blurring of faces, in our increasingly visual times. For illustrative purposes we draw on two empirical studies with asylum-seeking and refugee children and youths in Finland and Australia. Through these cases we deliberate on the ethical balance of children’s wish to show their faces and researchers’ duty to hide them, and contemplate the research–audience relationship: what kinds of consequences might the blurring of faces have for children and young people? We argue that the ability of face to go beyond language and communicate sensory experiences that are hard to verbalise is particularly important when working with disadvantaged or marginalised groups (Lenette and Cleland, 2016; Ortega-Alcazar and Dryck, 2012; Teti, 2019). As suggested by Nutbrown (2011), we encourage going beyond methods that are practically and ethically simple to honour the multiple facets of the lived experiences of children and young people (also Kaukko et al., 2019). Childhood studies have the potential of ‘mak[ing] visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections’ (Spyrou, 2021: 4, borrowing from Burawoy, 2005: 264). Therefore, while not undermining the value of privacy and protection, we argue for not reducing children and youths into ‘faceless objects’ in the name of research ethics.

### *Voice and image in childhood studies*

It has been long realised in childhood studies that traditional research methods have a tendency of silencing children (Powell and Smith, 2009; Qvortrup, 1997; Spyros, 2011) or, at the least, not giving full justice to their voices (Elden, 2013). As a response, researchers have been creative in finding ways to amplify the voices through various child-centred, artistic and participatory methods. It appears that alternative methods have become popular particularly when working with children and youths in vulnerable situations (Wharton, 2020) or with those who participate in their non-native language (Woolhouse, 2019). There is also a call for being mindful of the power imbalances in

research relationships between children and adults – inevitably present also in participatory research – and the ideological contexts which inform the production and reception of any kind of a voice (Spyrou, 2011). In addition to encouraging children to use their voices beyond traditional research methods, researchers are urged to think how to hear and treat these voices with respect and accuracy as a child's voice can only find resonance in a context that is receptive and open (Kaukko & Kiilakoski, 2018).

Many of the above-mentioned creative methods rely on visual data to promote children's voices in research. Producing photographs, videos, drawings, maps, collages or scrapbooks are said to give children ownership of their representation (Thomson, 2008), make them co-participants in the production of knowledge (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015) and enhance their agency (Semeneć, 2018). Moreover, visibility is argued to inspire participants who lack opportunities to discuss their experiences (Spyrou, 2011; Wang, 1999) and to provide researchers with access to unspokable spaces (Semeneć, 2018). Visual methods may also facilitate expressions across varied levels of language and literacy and capture experiences that are difficult to articulate (Wang, 1999; Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020) or topics that are considered as taboo or dangerous to discuss with children (Semeneć, 2018). It has been claimed that by including visual elements, research can become mutually beneficial and voice-empowering for children (Thomson, 2008).

The development of visual research methods is in line with the increasingly visual worlds and new digital innovations, but the majority of visual research still implements rather traditional methods (photos, visual art) instead of experimenting with the multiplicity of visual media (Mainsah and Prøitz, 2019). This may contradict children's everyday lives which for many is realised in spontaneous photos and videos through digital platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. (Semeneć (2018) : 66) suggests that participatory visual methods do not overcome the problems associated with representation; they are not 'synonymous with more equitable relations between children and researchers, nor can [they] guarantee that children will feel more empowered, or that their voice will be heard any more than with traditional research approaches'. This limitedness of adults' ability to (re)present children's voices calls for recognising children's own ways of sharing their lives; it requires a move beyond claims of authenticity towards trying to understand children's worlds as they present them, with all its complexity, messiness and non-normative nature (Spyrou, 2011). Whilst the extensive focus is on voice in childhood studies, much less interest has been placed on how children already, in their naturally existing everyday worlds, express their views and thoughts – by increasingly using their photographed and videoed face as a vehicle.

A growing number of researchers wish to see children's participation and agency 'not as the outcome of academic theory but rather as recognition that they are subjects of rights' (Beazley et al., 2009: 369). This strain of research aims to find ways not only to ensure that children's voices are heard by researchers but also to make sure research provides children with opportunities and benefits in society (Canosa et al., 2018; Spyrou 2021). The value of children's self-chosen visual representations is that, when used thoughtfully, they allow children to express their views through a gaze which is almost exclusively theirs and compels others to look at, see and feel their experiences (Fink, 2012). While pictures in research can only provide an analytical entry point to the

complexities behind what is pictured - and what is absenced - the power of visual expression can act as a communication bridge which may be used to engage, educate and influence community members, practitioners and policy and decision makers (Mitchell et al., 2017; Teti, 2019). Rather than aiming to vocalise the representational content of children's images it can, hence, be more effective to rely on the affective and agentic force of these images as they are (Semeneć, 2018).

### *Protection, anonymity and the problem of face*

Using visibility to strengthen children's voice in research raises ethical considerations around issues of recruitment, representation, participation and advocacy (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001). A particular concern is the issue of privacy (Cullen and Walsh, 2020) and how this risk is multiplied by uncontrolled and permanent (online) dissemination of visual expression (Teti, 2019). Particularly when working with children, visual researchers 'grapple with an additional layer of complex ethical conundrums connected to the visual material created during the research process' (Canosa et al., 2018). Specific ethical guidelines have been developed to guide researchers in recognising and responding to the ethical issues that arise in the implementation of visual research methods (Canosa et al., 2018), but it is also increasingly understood that research ethics encompass much more than what any guidelines are able to cover. Ethical dilemmas arise and persist long after the clearance is granted by an ethics committee, and the range of possible ethical dilemmas can never be realistically envisioned when planning research (Canosa et al., 2018; Kaukko et al., 2017, 2019).

To mitigate the risks of visibility, researchers are taught to rely on anonymisation (Nutbrown, 2011; Teti, 2019). Anonymity is normalised through research ethics guidelines recommending disguising participants' personal identities as a default position (Saunders et al., 2015). Concealing children's identities through pseudonyms and blurred images is expected to assure children's disconnection to the research at present, and later when they may not want to be associated with the views they have expressed or groups they have represented as children (Spencer, 2020: 2). Anonymity can also be empowering as it allows children to speak freely without concerns of negative personal consequences (Gordon, 2019). These reasons have underpinned anonymity as a central and unproblematised ethical guideline in childhood research (Gordon, 2019: 543). Hence, issues of anonymity are typically mentioned briefly and categorically in the description of research practices (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011).

However, as Gerver (2013) points out, blanket anonymity – automatic anonymisation of participants without asking their opinion about it – lacks contextual consideration. Achieving complete anonymity is impossible in many types of ethnographic, participatory and emancipatory approaches due to their methodological design (Walsh et al., 2008; Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). Ethnographic studies typically include thick descriptions of the context, which are difficult to fully anonymise. Participants may also form closely knit communities, meaning that they know each other's identities despite the pseudonyms (Holland et al., 2010). Moreover, in such studies the participation of research subjects is commonly assumed in all phases of research, including dissemination, which

in art-based approaches may result in children wishing to claim their work. This muddies the space of anonymity with issues of ownership (Canosa and Walsh, 2020; Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). Anonymity, therefore, may fail to do justice to the complex and affective data, and to the participants (Nutbrown, 2011; Wilson, 2018).

The commitment of giving voice to children requires involving them in the decision-making process also around research ethics Gordon (2019: 544) states that anonymity is 'embedded in paternalistic presuppositions about marginalisation and power... play(ing) a role in maintaining the same unequal power relationships in research that prevail in society in general'. Thus, authors report on participants expressing their will not to be anonymised in the dissemination as they feel deserving of credit for their accomplishment (Kauko, 2021; Millei et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2008), wanting to leave traces of themselves and of other people and places (Hockey, 2014), or wanting to gain respect and recognition from their friends (Elliot and Lawrence, 2017) or from professionals (Wilson, 2018). The young people in Yanar et al.'s (2016) research questioned how to foster change if they are not able to be acknowledged by name. (Wilson, 2018): 1214 consolidates that by 'erasure of personhood' anonymity may feed to stigmatisation and misleading social imaginaries and create 'distance that separates participants from researchers and the audiences' (Smart, 2014: 11). This disregards the promise of social justice or social change often inscribed in participatory visual methods (Teti, 2019) and may prevent the pursuit of transformative research goals (Saunders et al., 2015).

Participants' claims of unmasked identity can leave the researchers feeling guilty for following the normative research ethics instead of the participants' wishes (Elliot and Lawrence, 2017). However, some have addressed the dilemma by following the ethics of recognition by, for instance, allowing a respondent to use their own name (Wilson, 2018) or by deciding not to anonymise the images of young people in the films so as to uphold their right to be made visible (Wiles et al., 2008). Walsh et al. (2008) considered the artwork produced for the research by young people to be already public. Furthermore, in her study on Israeli refugees, Gerver (2013) shows that in the case of vulnerable groups, the exposure of a 'real name attached to a real story' can, in fact, be more ethical than anonymity, as it provides benefits relating to livelihoods, self-empowerment and advocacy (see also Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). Hence, the expectation that anonymity should be maintained throughout the research process can serve to create further ethical challenges (Nespor, 2000: 550).

### *The studies*

To further illustrate the problems of anonymity in childhood and youth research we turn to two research studies conducted in 2017–2020 with asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people in Finland and Australia. Both studies employed visual techniques to capture participants' views of their everyday lives, elicit discussion with the children and young people, allow them to express themselves in their favoured ways, and create opportunities and experiences for them to feel heard, appreciated and recognised. As researchers, we recognise our positions as not being passive or objective in the children and youths' knowledge creation. However, our aim has been to give room for the

participants, partly through visibility, to communicate issues meaningful to them in agentic ways. Although the sought-after societal impact motivates us as researchers, in both studies the ‘going public’ (see Millei et al., 2022) was not planned but emerged in the process due to the participants’ wish.

The first study explored young asylum seekers’ and refugees’ social networks and relationships in Finland. The aim was to learn particularly about their friendships, peer relationships and social support networks in their new country of residence. In all, 26 asylum-seeking and refugee boys and six girls from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Northern Africa, aged 13–18, participated in the study. The qualitative data, composed of various ethnographic activities, was created in the school which the participants attended. As one of the research activities, the participants were asked to take photos connected to the themes of friends and friendship or to choose photos they had taken earlier that represented these themes. The photos were used to elicit discussion about the meaning and practices of friendship and the advantages and complexities around peer relationships in their current conditions. As an unplanned addition, a photo exhibition was created as the participants wanted an audience for their photos, which they considered to be of good quality and accurately telling about their lives. The exhibition was held at the participants’ school and, with public entrance, at the university and a public library. The researcher got spontaneous feedback from the audience, which consisted of invited students from other schools, university staff, local media and random visitors to the library. After seeing the exhibition the audience was also invited to write their thoughts and impressions on an open-ended questionnaire.

The second study focused on what constitutes educational success for children from a range of refugee backgrounds. The data of one part of this study consists of audiovisual material collected in an Australian primary school by 13 participants, aged 6 to 10, who came from various Asian countries. Among other materials, the children created audiovisual data (video clips) of their everyday school practices and identified and analysed moments in which they experienced feelings of educational success. This success was understood very broadly as encompassing any academic and social achievements as well as other less visible factors that make them feel positive in school. It was initially planned that the children’s video clips would only be used for academic purposes, i.e. to be analysed together with the children and then used as anonymous research data. However, the children were proud of the footage they had created and wanted to share it further. The pre-reviewed research ethics of the project, highlighting anonymity, prohibited this, which was against the wishes of the participants.

In what follows we look at two extracts from our field notes of these projects. The participants, methods, data and research ethics, as well as the more comprehensive accounts of the aims and findings of these studies, are presented in more detail in our other publications (see e.g. Kaukko & Wilkinson 2020; Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020).

### *The retrospection*

*‘The young terrorists’ – Hidden faces creating further stigma.* Excerpt from Riikka’s (Author 1) notes - 15 March 2017, Finland, working on the photo exhibition at school:

...The boys had to hurry for their class and I stayed to clean the supplies etc. [A teacher] walked by and took a glimpse of the photos on display and said: "Heck they look like terrorists!" I think she was pointing to Azeem's<sup>2</sup> photo. She sounded either amused or appalled, I'm not sure?! It was the photo of Azeem's friends in Iraq in the dark.

The original photo was a selfie of six teenage boys standing on a dusty road in the evening. The boy holding the camera had a broad smile and content face, and the others were standing behind him with their hands in their pockets, smiling faintly, looking relaxed. The photo had been sent via Messenger to Azeem in Finland as a greeting from his friends back in Iraq. Azeem had chosen the photo for the exhibition to represent the topic 'Friends near and far' with the caption 'What's up bro? A message from old friends'. Like all the photos chosen for the exhibition, the inclusion of the photo was negotiated with and approved by other participants, as they felt it represented one of the main messages they wished to deliver: 'I'm just ordinary, like a Finnish boy', as it was put by 15 year-old Hamasa (see [Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020](#)). This explicitly positioned the exhibition as what ([Spencer, 2020](#)): 2) calls 'visual images of children as landscapes that have broader (bio)political implications'.

As it had been impossible to ask for consent from the Iraqi boys in Azeem's photo, it was agreed to blur their faces in the photo for the exhibition. Their faces hidden, the teacher who looked at the photo could not see their relaxed and playful expressions, and it was difficult to tell what was going on in the photo. She saw young men with black hair and dark skin, clearly not on Finnish terrain, wearing sandals and leather jackets. One was wearing green army patterned trousers with hands deep in his pockets. While this gesture made the boy look relaxed in the initial photo, it may have been interpreted as defiant by the teacher. In this contextual situation, where the relative homogeneity of Finnish society<sup>3</sup> made the image of the Iraqi young men stand out, it is unlikely that a similar photo of blond boys pictured in a typical Finnish landscape would have raised the same response. It is also possible that the teacher's reaction was due to the timing of the exhibition, which took place soon after a widely reported terror attack by a young asylum-seeker in Finland, causing increased prejudice towards young men with a refugee background (e.g. [BBC News, 2017](#)). Regardless of her rationale, the teacher's hasty interpretation of the photo was negative and stigmatising. In her mind, she saw the *obvious* when she saw the boys as 'the terrorists'. The photo was removed from the exhibition to avoid further negative misinterpretation, which was disappointing to Azeem who wanted to have his friends on display. Later, another photo of Azeem's friends was found to replace the removed image.

### *The future YouTubers - Anonymity inhibiting children's voice being heard*

Excerpt from Mervi's (Author 2) notes - 15 May 2019, Australia, data analysis workshop at a primary school:

Ali's eyes are glued to the big whiteboard on the classroom wall. He usually chooses not to sit in one spot for very long but instead jumps, climbs and runs around. Now, he is mesmerised



by what he sees on the screen. Ali is watching a video clip he had filmed a few days ago. On that particular day he had chosen to take a polar bear costume from the dress up cupboard and wear it so that it was open just enough to show the GoPro camera attached to his chest. White fur frames the screen, as the view of a polar bear. In the footage he moves, bearlike, around the Junior Learning House, searching for fish to eat. Now Ali is proud of what he sees. I try to ask, but he does not care to elaborate on the thinking behind his activities, or why he chose to be a polar bear. He is amazed by how exciting the film looks. He wants to show it to his classmates. If I were to try to find moments of success in school, then seeing the outcome of this filming was one.

In this study the data collection was done by young primary school children wearing micro-cameras attached to their chest on a harness. Like the boy in the above example, all the children were happy to film and extremely excited to see the outcome. The child-view footage of their schoolwork and outdoor play, such as climbing trees, swinging or playing tiggy (tag), was of high quality, and the children felt proud to see themselves on the big screen. While they all enjoyed watching the selected clips, not all were eager to contribute to the analysis.

After the children had first viewed the selected clips of their own footage, they were invited to analyse them with the researcher. With guiding questions, the researcher tried to prompt them to elaborate on the moments they identified as making them feel successful. Rather than being interested in the analysis, the children enjoyed watching the films. In some clips, they were clearly taking the role of a performing artist. They were narrating what they were doing, such as, 'Look, here I am going to the green playground. What a beautiful day!' and choosing to do activities that would look interesting on the clips, such as going through a green, closed slide. Some of the children later told the researcher that they were practising for their future YouTube careers. Understandably, the proud authors of the films were disappointed that the footage could not be shared even with their own class or friends, let alone on the Internet. While acknowledging that these were children with refugee backgrounds, we feel that any child would have been disillusioned by the situation. Therefore, we perceive the disappointments caused by anonymity applying to all children but recognise the multiplied stigma it may cause to the marginalised minority groups as happened in our first example.

### *Analysis and discussion*

Despite being individual extracts, the examples above do not stand alone. The dilemma of complying with the requirements of standardised normative ethics is shared by researchers in childhood and youth studies, and there is a general push to present unadulterated visual images which have not been rendered anonymous (Canosa et al., 2018; Nutbrown, 2011). Yet, there is no consensus on how this would be best accomplished. The decision of whether to blur or pixelate images and how – if this is the decision – should be made with attention to the cultural and political context in which these images exist. Childhood researchers should be open to novel interpretations of how the images are

arranged (Spencer, 2020), and how they manage to appreciate children's voices and, in particular, their preferences regarding the representation of their voice.

The examples presented in this paper invited us to critically consider the ethical issues of consent, anonymity and censorship, and how they linked with childhood research debates on the protection, participation and agency of children. The Finnish example illustrates a visual display of children's images in a public forum. The Australian example highlights the children's wish to be represented via forums that are more flexible and familiar for them, that is, in short videos. Both forms allowed the participating children or youths to see the outcomes of their contributions. However, the two studies presented us with separate ethical considerations. In the first example, we had to consider the wishes of the participating asylum-seeking young people of how they should be seen, while we also had to critically evaluate how these images would be received by their audiences. The Finnish teacher's response was an indicator that blanket anonymity is not always the most ethical practise (also Gerver 2013). In the Australian example, the participants wanted not only to see but also to share and to claim ownership of their contributions, but they could not do that because claiming and sharing the videos revealed their identities. These dilemmas are always relational, contextual and subjective and should be considered in collaboration with the participants (Gordon 2019). It is likely that the children and young people who participate in our studies the next time will have a different opinion about how they would like to be seen by others. Therefore, there is a need for researchers to develop their own media literacies by considering situational ethical conundrums when working with participatory ideals in visual research, and to learn to communicate about these issues to the research participants (Rosemberg & Evans-Agnew 2020).

### *Considering children's preferences*

In both of our studies the children and young people had generated personal visual material which they wanted to share more widely than what is recommended by the formal research-ethical standards. The young people in the Finnish study eventually received some recognition for their photo art as, to solve the anonymity-participants' wishes -dilemma, the exhibition was separated from the research study. This meant that also some non-research-participating young people were included in the construction of the exhibition, and all the participants' names were revealed together in the exhibition context. This assured that the audiences did not know which of the youths also participated in the original research study. Nevertheless, disappointment remained that they were not able to share their photos unaltered as they showed faces of the participants and other people.

Along the same lines, the Australian children got some compensation for their performances in the form of a professionally filmed and edited video, which was similarly separated from the research study as in the Finnish example. Sharing the material on YouTube channels or TikTok was out of the question, as this was not part of the original research plan and, even if it had been, the ethics requirements would have hardly allowed for it. Hence, despite her wishes, Mervi (Author 2) found no way to give the children the full ownership of their footage.

For children in Finland and Australia, the lived experience of visibility as a cultural norm (O'Hara and Higgings, 2019) is realised in the countless opportunities for visual communication through social media platforms. Including the participants in our studies, online tools have provided children with opportunities to reach massive audiences for their voices. This makes them increasingly conscious of how they appear also in visual representation. We argue that this turn in social media practices translates to how children see their participation in research. In the Australian study, the children craved to put their footage on YouTube. In Finland, the participants were clear about how they wanted the research concerning them to be communicated, i.e. in the form of a photo exhibition. In both studies the children and young people saw their visual participation as an opportunity to represent themselves beyond their voice, not only for what they say but also how they appear. As highlighted by Woolhouse (2019), this can be especially beneficial when working with people whose linguistic communication is more complicated because of, for instance, their age or language difficulties. The need is also heightened when working with research topics that aim to address the areas of inclusion and social justice, as was the case in our studies.

It is important to understand children's relational encounters and emerging entanglements with the changing, increasingly connected world of which public visual expression is naturally a part (Spyrou, 2011; Spencer, 2020). New technologies have added layers to the ways in which children produce their voices and how researchers can seek to understand these worlds. They have also broadened the scope in which children's voices can be reproduced, altered, transferred and distributed (Spyrou, 2011). While discussion exists about the ethical challenges of researchers' aims to amplify the voices of children, there needs to be a wider discussion about *children's preferences* in relation to their voice, face and agency. In our studies, children's wishes and aims were clear, but we still struggled and, eventually, discreetly stretched the borders of our pre-ethical clearance to at least partly comply with their situational preferences. One size rarely fits all when it comes to ethical considerations in visual participatory research as the processes, outcomes and dissemination will vary based on the context, the social issue being confronted and the participants' experiences. More discussion is needed about how the ethical precautions regarding anonymity could co-exist with children's wishes to have their voices heard and faces shown and how to speak to the audiences that matter to the participants – this often being other children and youths, as in our Australian study, and sometimes with a political agenda, as with the studied young people in Finland.

### *Considering public audiences*

The children and young people had chosen to consent to our studies with their (anonymous) photos and videos, but their motivation to 'give their face' to our projects was derived and strengthened with the assumed opportunity to go public. While we feel the responsibility to honour this desire and respect the participatory aims of childhood research – to listen to, respect and amplify the voices of children in the way they want their voices to be heard and shared – these objectives are challenging. For instance, as legitimately often pointed out, children and young people may not be able to judge the

consequences of publicity in relation to their own benefit in the long- or short-term (Spencer, 2020: 2). However, just like we need critical and reflexive research which problematises children's voice, we also need to scrutinise the processes which aim to produce or amplify it.

Both cases stress that visual expression is not significant only to its creators but also to its *audiences* (also Healy & Fitzgibbon 2020). The by-passing teacher in Finland was negatively affected by the photo she saw, and the Australian schoolchildren missed seeing the videos of their classmates. A native-born Finnish girl, who came to see the photo exhibition created by the refugee youths, commented on a photo where the faces *were* visible: 'Seeing this photo it hit me that they [young asylum-seekers and refugees] are just like us, just hanging out with friends and all that'. This comment was in line with the general atmosphere of the comments by the exhibition viewers. Hence, in comparison to the comment by the teacher who saw the blurred photo, we suspect that the difference between the viewers may have resulted from the (non)visibility of the face. Equally, a child watching Ali's polar bear film in Australia could have identified with the joyful role play Ali was engaged in, noticing how the imaginary games have similarities across children in any context. Moreover, as making and seeing the film was clearly a moment of success for the boy who filmed it, it could have been that of him also in the eyes of his classmates and in the broader school community if it would have been allowed to be shown. While this is speculation, it is clear from the comments by the people who came to see the exhibition in the Finnish study, that by using images thoughtfully and ethically we have a chance to engage with audiences at a deeper level: expressing things that are out of reach of words, raising empathy and making the audience identify with the events and lives in the chosen illustrations. This was also demonstrated by the audience comment after our presentation in the research conference in Halle, which we presented in the beginning of this article. The audience expects to feel moved, unsettled or provoked when viewing (Smart, 2010), and this may be lost in the blurred faces of children and young people.

Images have the potential 'to undo, or to break with, typical ways of thinking and feeling' (Semeneć, 2018: 64). (Wilson, 2018): 1214) states that images by and of the participants can 'stay with the audience', hence provoking empathy and potentially even action. As the goal in social research is often to challenge stigmatising and false interpretations (Wilson, 2018), hiding the faces of participants in representation risks the very reason of showing the pictures in the first place, which was clear in the Finnish example. It demonstrates that with particularly stigmatised groups, such as asylum-seeking and refugee children and youths, 'it is more difficult to challenge stereotyped public imaginations or to reduce distance from those treated as "generalised others" (Kohn 2016) without contrary detailed and sometimes visual and potentially identifying evidence' (Wilson, 2018: 1219). Instead, as shown in the teacher's comment on the photo, anonymisation may *strengthen* stigma and false imaginaries, even when the practice is well-meaning and ethically approved.

Our examples also illustrate how images are understood and made meaningful through culture (Spencer, 2020: 5). In some Western countries, such as Finland, the sudden growth of asylum-seeking migration is an unseen phenomenon and, consequently, a young male

with a recognisably non-native ethnic origin may for some represent a risk to national and local cohesion and safety. This can lead to rash conclusions and hasty outbursts, as we saw in the reaction of the teacher. Such declarations – even when they are only thoughtless remarks – are not innocent or meaningless but rather causative representations of dominant discourses displaying inequalities and positions of power (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, referred in Spencer, 2020: 7–8). This holds true both for homogeneous countries with a history of low immigration rates, such as Finland, and also for countries with longer histories of multiculturalism, such as Australia.

The dominating discourses tend to label minorities categorically as uniform non-individuals and faceless others. This *erasure of personhood* (Smart, 2014; Wilson, 2018) is reproduced by the concealment of faces, which was demonstrated in the Finnish study and further confirmed by our conference audience in Halle. Denying access to the specific worlds of children by making them ambiguous withholds information about what the picture is about and creates distance between the participants and their audiences. Anonymity can make children invisible, and also visible in an obscure, distorted or odd way. Blurring and pixelation can be dehumanising and provoke fear, hatred, ridicule or vulnerability. As images determine how people see children in marginalised positions, they eventually have implications on the ways in which these children see themselves as part of their lived communities and societies. In this way, well-meaning but thoughtless application of blanket ethics may unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes and renew vulnerable positions.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research has been funded by the Academy of Finland postdoctoral awards SA285592 (Korkiamäki) and SA331029 (Kaukko).

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### Notes

1. “Going Public? Ethnography in Education and Social Work and its Publics” conference in Halle, Germany, in November 2019.
2. In this article pseudonyms are used for the participants of both studies. The use of pseudonyms for research publications was agreed on by the participating children and young people
3. In Finland, approximately only 7% of population speak other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami, which are the official native languages, as their first language.

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