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Perceptions of death among children in Sweden

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Perceptions of death among children in Sweden
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ABSTRACT
The article discusses children’s thoughts about death. Research was carried out in two elementary schools in Sweden among 40 children between 6 and 9 years of age, data were collected through text reading, movie viewing and dialogues with children. The main results reveal child-specific thoughts about the end of life, i.e., ideas children construe on their own. The findings also show society- and time-specific thoughts that children take from their societal and cultural context. The article proposes an integrative approach between these two: it is only when the categories of child-specific and society- and time-specific thoughts are combined that we get a fair picture of children’s perceptions of death. The main finding is that children form ideas of their own; they are not completely under the influence of their societal and cultural context. Children take over ideas from their surrounding society but they also express ideas produced by themselves.

‘I wonder what it’s like to die, is it nice or do we stay in the coffin’ (a 7-year-old child).

1. Introduction; positions and tendencies
Research marks an object and looks at a well-defined and limited field, this has been a tendency in research on children’s understanding of death as well, today it is emphasised that comprehension of death is a multilayered phenomenon characterised by cultural, social and religious influences and evolutionary components (Speece 1995; Bering and Bjorklund 2004; Legare et al. 2012; Panagiotaki et al. 2014; Miller et al. 2014). Death is also seen as a part of life: ‘Are life and death concepts related? (…) Perhaps theory and research about children’s conceptions of death should also include conceptions of life, so that we might better understand that correspondence between these constructs. This knowledge would be essential’ (Kenyon 2001, 87). Kenyon writes: ‘Clearly,
understanding of life should be explored in studies of children’s concepts of death, and a focus on human or animal death, instead of inanimate objects, is important’ (2001, 79). To take a one-dimensional look at the research objects and marking the object, using what Legare et al. call ‘target-dependent thinking’ (783), is not the sole strategy anymore. Moving to a non-dualistic view of the spiritual and material Paul Tillich wrote: ‘the negation of life (…) is a condition of life, and the more so, the richer the life is’ (1964a, 2). In his view ‘the creative spirit conquers death by being born out of it’ (4). Life and death are correlational concepts in Tillich (Author 2019).

If research on children’s understanding of death have moved in the direction where death or the negation of life is seen as a part of life, it comes close to the new materiality position represented by Gilles Deleuze and recently by Giorgio Agamben. In adherence to Deleuze, Agamben writes ‘that the concept of “life” (…) must constitute the subject of the coming philosophy’ (1999, 238). Life, in Agamben’s view, contains both a generic potentiality and an existing potentiality, the existing potentiality being immersed with impotentiality or the negation of life (1998, 45). Deleuze on his side warns us that ‘we shouldn’t enclose life in the single moment when individual life confronts universal death. A life is everywhere’ (2001, 29). Deleuze was sceptical about general explanations of life, he thought that there is the expressive dimension where life expresses itself; life is always a life expressing itself (Ibid.). When it comes to understanding something about children’s perception of death the child perspective is important: children express how they understand death, life and afterlife. Given this perspective, starting from the collected empirical material, there are child-specific ideas or components which children construe spontaneously on their own while making sense of death. In this article, it is shown how some child-specific ideas look like among Sweden living children at the age of 6–9 years.

In Sweden, there is a long research tradition of looking at children’s existential questions. Since the 1960s, Sven G. Hartman and his research team have collected thoughts about life from children between 8 and 13 years of age (Hartman and Torstenson 2007). The research has been conducted in school context. The theoretical framework of their research was based on life-view research. A life-view approach, as it was understood by Hartman et al., has three central elements: what we know and believe about life and death, values, and possible actions (Green and Hartman 1992, 15). Understanding a life-view in theoretical terms is one side of Hartman’s research, the other, perhaps more important, part is that Hartman lifts up the perspective of children and children’s own thoughts about life. In Green’s and Hartman’s view, ‘there is no doubt that even small children are able to formulate important questions’; they ‘develop a life-view of their own’ (15). We see two basic perspectives in this: the perspective of children, where children’s own views are lifted up, and the perspective on children, where the researcher tries to comprehend what
children say. We integrate the two-perspectives, although our emphasis is on children's own perceptions.

The research on children’s understanding of death tends in the direction of seeing the natural and the cultural evolution as integrated with each other. In Bering’s and Bjorklund’s research on children’s afterlife beliefs ‘evolutionary based mechanisms’ and ‘cultural mechanisms’ are pointed out as two possible components of the beliefs (2004, 218). The cultural mechanisms produce beliefs that are formed in the societal/cultural context in the perspective of outside-in, the time- and society-specific ideas in our vocabulary. Evolutionary mechanisms produce beliefs with components independent of the socially formed ones. One of Bering’s and Bjorklund’s points is that ‘a general belief in the continuity of mental states in dead agents is not something that children acquire as a product of their social-religious upbringing but is more likely a natural disposition that interacts with various learning channels’ (218). They admit of beliefs independent from the social/cultural/religious upbringing; we do agree. Our intention is not to try to identify possible learning channels but to point to the fact that children have the child-specific ideas considering death and afterlife, surplus to society-specific ideas. Legare et al. speak about ‘integrative thinking’, ‘synthetic thinking’ and ‘target-dependent thinking’ (2012, 783). In integrative thinking ‘two different explanations are integrated into a single explanation’: a person might be in heaven with other people but might return ‘back to life’ (783). In synthetic thinking two ideas are in a syncretic relation with each other, they are simply combined with each other and they might stand in contradiction to each other: heart might have stopped in heaven but the rest of the body functions (Ibid). In target-dependent thinking only one explanation is lifted up: ‘soul is alive’ but the rest is in the earth (Ibid). We like to add productive thinking to these three capacities: children are also capable of producing ideas of their own independent from their social/cultural/religious upbringing. Children are immersed in the society, but they seem to have ideas that cannot be explained by the immersion. Children analyse, they synthetise by bringing ideas together, they produce and they feel things, even when it comes to perceptions of death. In target-dependent and one-dimensional either/or thinking the idea-side (cognitive/rational capacity) is emphasised and not the emotional side of thinking (Damasio 1994, 2012; Author 2003).

There is the move from the adult understanding of childhood to the children perspective (Hay and Nye 2006; Wyness 2012). It is pointed out by Hay and Nye ‘that there is in every child a spiritual potentiality no matter what the child’s cultural context maybe’ (Hay and Nye 2006, 60). Perhaps it is this spiritual potentiality outside the cultural context that comes to expression in child-specific ideas? Children take over ideas from their cultural context, their perceptions become ‘colored’ by their surroundings, but they also produce own ideas. Browsing on the internet with How do children speak about death most of the files are about How to talk to children about death (20,190,513). On the seventh place, we found How young children understand death and how to talk to them about it. Among the
initial 50 files, only one is about that how children speak about death. The adult perspective is expressed considering children’s understanding of death. It is important for adults to be able to speak with children about death, but we should understand that children’s understanding of death is multilayered consisting of different types of components. Traditionally the key components have been listed as following: *universality* (people, animals and plants all die), *irreversibility* (death is final), *non-functionality* (organs do not function when dead) and *causality* (children try to identify the causal factors like disease or accident that led to death) (Speece 1995, 1f). Mark W. Speece proposes a fifth component: ‘noncorporeal continuation’, claiming that ‘noncorporeal continuation responses [e.g., heaven] are common among children’ (4). In our material, there are expressions of noncorporeal continuation, both in child-specific and time- and society-specific ways. While asked what happens when one dies, a child answered:

We go up to heaven. Some people believe that s/he goes up to heaven and becomes an angel and some believe that s/he goes down to the earth and lays there. (...) Some believe that s/he comes to hell also. (While asked where that is, the child continued) Further down in the earth perhaps.

A child-specific way is expressed in this way:

But the best thing would be that time is not the same time as in the world, in the real world, and then it takes maybe one hundred or ninety years and then it would feel like it was only two days.

Speece writes that ‘the appropriate methodology for exploring children’s understandings about nonnaturalistic aspects of death, as separate from their understanding of Irreversibility and Nonfunctionality, remains an interesting challenge’ (4). We think that talking about death as irreversible and nonfunctional expresses the adult understanding of death. However, we do not wish to deny that such components are to be found in children’s perception of death, but they are readings and interpretations from the adult point of view which are to be balanced with that what children say about death.

Considering emotions we like to point out that our material does not confirm that fear is a central emotion in relation to death. ‘Previous studies of children’s fear, which have shown that fear of death and danger typically emerges in the preschool period, and remains among the most commonly endorsed fears from age 7 onwards’ (Slaughter and Griffiths 2007, 532f). The children we met were 6–9 years of age, they do not show fear of death or discomfort in speaking about death, they mentioned fear in relation to death, but they saw death as a part of life for humankind, animals and plants:

When a person gets really old and s/he maybe thinks that it is so hard to live so maybe s/he wants to die.
Perhaps it is we adults who are more afraid of dying than children, projecting our understanding into children’s perceptions of death, wondering how nice it would be to lie in a coffin?

The theoretical basis of the present study is that children are relational and relating beings; children’s consciousness is relational (Hay and Nye 2006, 110; Hyde 2008, 51). We find the relational view on humankind even in Existentialism: Individuals become what they are in relation to each other and in relation to their societal/cultural/environmental surroundings (Feuerbach 1957, 5; Kierkegaard 1941, online edition, Chapter A; Heidegger 1993, 236; Taylor, 2004, 277). Following Feuerbach, we define thinking as one of the constitutive capacities of human nature, among feeling and willing, which comes into being in interaction with the human and the more-than-human world (1957; considering the more-than-human world see Abram 1997). This is in opposition to the modern conception of the self as independent, autonomous and self-determining (regarding criticism of the modern conception, see Giddens 2003, 10; Taylor 1992, 160). When we speak about child-specific ideas and time-and society-specific ideas we are referring to two facets of relationality or mentality. Brendan Hyde equates spirituality and relationality; in his view, ‘spirituality is in fact a natural predisposition of humankind’ (2008, 30). Paul Tillich discusses whether the word ‘mental’ could be used instead of ‘spiritual’, writing: ‘I avoid the word mental, but when I say spiritual this is more or less the same’ (1959, 8). We prefer words like ‘mental’ and ‘relational’ when speaking about the constitutive phenomena of humankind, but we also use the word ‘spirituality’ when it is relevant.

Much of the contemporary research on death/understanding death has been done in psychology (Panagiotaki et al. 2014), pastoral care (Bates and Kearney 2015), from a Christian/Religious point of view (Ratcliff 2004) and from the health perspective (Zalaudikova, 2010). In Robert Coles (1990), we find an integrative perspective between psychology and religion, and in his research the perspective of children is in focus. Joshua Russell’s (2016/2017) research on children’s understanding of death in human-animal-nature relationships (the more-than-human world) is valuable, as both Hartman’s material and our own empirical data show that animals are important to children. Unfortunately, Russell presented his results after our empirical research in the two schools was complete, it would have been valuable to incorporate his ecological perspective into our research. We agree with his point that research on how children understand death in an ecological environment has been lacking, though today the field is being explored more and more. In the results section, we present children’s own experiences and understandings of the death of pets and other domestic companions and we read their perceptions in the light of the map of analysis: 1) children analyse, 2) synthetise and 3) produce ideas mixed with emotions,
and they do this as individuals and as interactional agents in communion with their surroundings.

2. Methodology

We have employed movie viewing, text reading and dialogues as means to collect empirical data. The study was carried out at two schools in two gender-mixed classes with children in the first and second grade of primary school; there were 20 pupils in each class. There were dialogues both with the class and with minor groups of children with 6–8 participants in each group.

2.1. Sampling strategies

For the study, we chose a convenience sample. Contact was made with two primary schools belonging to a network of schools cooperating with the University of Gävle, Sweden. A request including the project description was given to the principals at the two schools. Subsequently, the principals contacted suitable teachers. Text reading and movie viewing with subsequent dialogues with children and their teacher took place at the chosen school in the classroom. The sessions, including the minor group discussions, were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

2.1.1. Data and procedure

Data collection methods consisted of reading sections from the children’s book Bröderna Lejonhjärta (The Brothers Lionheart, 2009) by Astrid Lindgren (originally written in 1973/2009), as well as seeing the film ’Pojken med guldbyxorna’ (The Boy with the Golden Pants) created by Leif Krantz in 1975. Both of these works can be considered Swedish classics. The reason why they were chosen is that the book, while telling a saga, can be characterised as dealing with existential concerns about life and death and that the film deals with relationships and values.

We began the text reading with a brief summary of the book’s content. Subsequently, we read specific sections from the book. The dialogues with the children followed the book narrative; we were interested in their thoughts about the themes in question. After the initial general discussion, dialogues were conducted in minor groups so that several children might get the opportunity to express their ideas. During the second session, selected episodes from the movie were shown. In connection with the film, we applied the same procedure: We began the discussions based on the film sequence and asked the children to comment on it, continuing discussions in minor groups. The main strategy was to let the children express their own views, then to ask them to explain what they meant, following the recommendation of not using closed questions (Fargas Malet et al. 2010, 7). One group of children had
a profound discussion about suicide and what happens afterwards. The teachers were present during the sessions. When particularly difficult words or concepts came up, the teacher could help explain the literal meaning of the word to the children.

Examples of questions we asked initially are: ‘So, what did you like about the book?’ and ‘What kind of film is this?’ Considering the book and the brothers’ relation with their father, who in our opinion is an ambiguous figure, we asked: ‘Is he mean, this father?’ The children responded that he is both sad and angry. While reading the book, we asked why one of the brothers died; one child answered: ‘He jumped out of the window!’ We continued asking why he jumped and got an answer: ‘In order to save his brother’. We continued: ‘What more happened in what we read, (…) what was the book about?’ The brother who jumps out of the window dies, and we asked: ‘But if things like this happen, like the house is burning and someone jumps out and dies, what happens afterwards? What happens when people die?’

3.2. Method of analysis

The transcription protocol was read through, coded and analysed individually by all of the researchers involved. To prevent other influences on the coding process, a need to maintain objectivity, the themes that emerged were discussed within the research team only after all of the authors had individually done the coding. By themes we mean the central ideas, in this case related to the end of life and afterlife, expressed in the transcribed material. The themes in their turn were grouped in sub-categories. Naturally, we were familiar with the content of both the book and the film. We had a kind of a pre-understanding of their central themes, and this might have affected which part of the book/film was considered central, thus directing the pupils towards what we thought was important. The children might answer what we think they should answer; a common bias in child research (Fargas Malet et al. 2010). However, we believe that the individual analysis of the material counteracts this bias. After the individual analysis, the group met to compare and discuss different themes that emerged in the analysis process. Central themes were selected jointly. In this way, we believe we were able to meet the condition of having ‘a coding scheme (procedure!) that is relevant and exhaustive for the material’ (Green and Hartman 1992, 22). After the coding and out-crystallisation of the central themes, we read them in the light of the map of analysis: children analyse, take a stand; synthetise, bring ideas together; produce, construe ideas of their own; they have emotions intertwined with their ideas and they discuss possible way of choice and action. They are there as thinking, feeling and willing human beings, in interaction both with other humans in the societal and cultural/religious context and with the more-than-human world (environment).
Given the empirical material, there are signs of analytic, synthetic and productive thinking in children’s perceptions.

3. Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee in Uppsala, Sweden (Reg. no. 2016/099). Within the framework of the study, the four main requirements for research have been met: consent, disclosure, confidentiality and utilisation. Honesty and objective communication between the observer, subject and public, respect for the integrity and dignity of the subjects and responsible valuation of information have all been essential throughout the study process.

Prior to the intervention with the children, a consent form with information about the study was sent to the pupils' parents/legal caregivers. The consent form contained information about the research methods, the purpose of the study and stated that participation was voluntary and could be stopped at any time by the pupil or the parents. The parents/caregivers gave their consent by signing and returning the consent form. It has also been important to ask for the children’s own consent. This has been done in connection with the intervention: We asked whether the pupils would like to participate or not; if they did not wish to, they were free to leave. We also told the children about the book and the film to mitigate any unpleasant surprises or discomfort. During the interventions, only the children whose legal caregivers had given their consent were allowed in the classroom; the other pupils took part in other school activities. All dialogues were audio-recorded. During transcription, the material was decoded so that no quotes were traceable to specific pupils or schools. During the entire study period, all recorded material and transcripts were kept by the researchers. Members of the research team are the only individuals who have had access to the gathered material.

4. Results

Five themes emerged from the empirical material: Meaning of death, Time, soul and death, Suicide, Death penalty and Killing of animals. Meaning of death refers to the fact that children try to make sense of death, stating what they think death is. Time, soul and death concerns what children think about when considering the soul; some of them had an advanced understanding about the nature of the soul. There was a rather long discussion about Suicide. It was the children who took up this particular theme, which is not in the book or the film. The Death penalty and Killing of animals were also given rather large scope in the discussions. It is most often through the first two themes that child-specific ideas about death and the afterlife come to expression:
4.1. Meaning of death

The informants discussed questions concerning the meaning of death and what happens after death. Some expressed that death is a mystery, something we cannot know. Death as a mystery we list as a sub-category. Sub-categories are the similar and common ideas expressed by several children. One of the children explained his/her view as follows:

You wonder how it feels to be dead . . . you don’t know what happens when you die. Only those who die know what’s happening.

And another said:

You can believe whatever you want, when you’ve died you don’t know what’s going on . . . some stuff can happen like she said (commenting on another child’s view), but no one really knows what’s going on when you die.

Some children’s understanding of death was quite matter of fact, congruent with target-dependent thinking. One child said: ‘You can die of disease. You lie there under the ground.’ Another emphasised: ‘You’re under the ground and you’ll never live again.’

There is a dualistic understanding of death. Some children said that you go to heaven when you die, and that bad people go to hell. The dualistic understanding steps out as a sub-category.

Some people believe that some will go to hell also. (Where is that, the researcher asks.) Far away underground, maybe. (…) But that’s only if you’ve done something really bad that people say you’ll go down to the devil when you die, if someone has committed suicide.

This dualistic understanding of the outcome of life could be viewed as something children have taken from their societal/cultural context. They are familiar with this kind of talk; it is an example of a society- and culture-specific idea and a significant theme in the material. We might say that children analyse the ideas they get from their context, they do take a stance: you go to hell if you have done something really bad, a minor assault do not give that destiny.

The children spoke about fear and suffering, but also about that how these disappear when people die. One child emphasised: ‘You may be afraid.’ Another believed that there is no reason for fear because: ‘When you die, the suffering and pain will go away.’ They also talked about happiness and sadness. One child pointed out that after death ‘You are happy; and then you get to do things you’ve always dreamed of.’ Another emphasised the positive aspect of living a long life in the face of death:

If anyone has said they feel terrified, I say we should be happy because it shows he’s lived a long time (considering the death of elderly people).

One child expressed sadness over the death of others, those we love; she said:
You get sad when people die. I sometimes think of my grandmother, because she’s dead and I’ll never know her because I was so small when she died.

What we find in these perceptions is a kind of a combination or synthetising of emotion and idea. There is also a way of understanding death as a relief, but children did not seem to approve of euthanasia:

We shouldn’t kill human beings before they die by themselves, we shouldn’t kill anybody. It’s better that you die, I mean if you’re sick, then you might die, but we shouldn’t purposefully kill anybody, in order to kill them. People don’t think it’s so bad to die, but it is, it’s not pleasant to die. (Another child continuing): But if you’re in pain and you die, the pain will disappear when you die.

Some children said they believed it was good when old people die. The old and sick no longer have to suffer, still less if they are tired; death brings relief. A person filled with fear and anxiety in the face of death does not synthetise fear with happiness or with relief. We think that the conversation shows that children produce their own emotionally charged understanding of death, inclining that synthetic ideas have an emotional charge.

The ways children laid out the meaning of death were varied. What strikes us is the diversity of the children’s opinions. Some of these opinions could be explained as ideas children have taken from their surroundings, like ‘heaven versus hell’, ‘becoming an angel’, ‘I’ve seen it in a movie, there were different times when people died, so either you went to heaven or to hell’. But there were also ideas that could be interpreted as child-specific thoughts about the meaning of death: death brings relief and old persons, especially if they are sick and tired, should be grateful for their long life. Another idea was that people might be happy, because now, after death, they can do things they have always dreamed of. Children synthetise the fact of death with the emotion of relief.

We found that the children expressed a secular understanding of time and death, according to which death is final; this understanding is familiar in their societal and cultural context:

When we die, it’s all over, and we don’t know what happens afterwards.

The understanding that death is final is something that other researchers have observed as well (Zaloudikova 2010). Still, there are hints and ideas about what happens after death, as one child expressed:

You don’t know what will happen when you die. (…) It’s only those who die who know what happens.

The conclusion here is analytic: given the facts, only those who die know what will happen.
4.2. Soul, time and death

We have pointed to the child-specific idea considering time: ‘hundred or ninety years (…) feels like it was only two days’. The usual linear understanding of time is transcended. The idea that eternity is timeless might be seen as child-specific, something the individual child has produced him- or herself. Some children said that the soul survives death:

The soul is there after death.

Other children, asked whether there was something after death, said that there is the soul and:

The soul goes up to heaven and we are also there.

One elderly girl (7–8 years) said she knew what the soul is:

I know, I know what the soul is.

When asked to explain, she continued:

The soul is in the body. (…) Because it’s not the outside that is the important thing, it’s the inside that’s important, because the heart is there, and the soul is in there and the lungs as well, yes, there are a lot of things there on the inside that we should be careful about. (Researcher: Is the heart in the soul or how does it function?). Yes, the heart is in the soul as it is the heart that makes that one also lives.

When asked whether the heart is in the soul, or what is actually the case, she replied:

Yes, the heart is in the soul because it’s the heart that lets you live. (…) you don’t feel the soul because it’s in here (pointing to her breast).

When asked whether the soul has a place, she answered:

All over, here (marking her whole body with her hands).

Later on, when we asked whether animals like cows have soul, one child answered that they do:

Except the walls and things like that, they don’t have a soul. (…) Plants have a soul.
(Another continued) Yes, they have a soul, they’re alive.

There are scholars who believe children are metaphysical by nature (Tillich 1964b, 156; Hay and Nye 2006, 58; Hyde 2008, 30). The above examples would seem to confirm this view. Talking about soul as if it were all over and in the entire body with its seat in the heart sounds metaphysical. To talk about the soul and claiming that it is all over in the body we read as a child-specific idea. It is a general idea in many religions, but we have difficulties to believe that the girl in question would have had such an advanced idea of soul if she only repeated what she had learned in her living context.
Some children also mentioned *reincarnation*, which stepped out as a sub-category in the analyses of the empirical material. After death, the soul enters a new person.

My mom and I once talked about what will happen when you die, then we thought that first you are placed in a room when you die, then the soul moves on and then it becomes a new person.

The fact that the child spoke about reincarnation in relation to death might be taken as a time- and society-specific idea. The child speaking with her mother is familiar with the idea of reincarnation, perhaps due to her mother and TV programmes on the topic. In Swedish national television, there are several programs that have picked up the theme of reincarnation and the afterlife. Our material shows, not only in this case, that parents have spoken about reincarnation with their children. The idea that eternity is timeless and that the soul resides in the heart, in the whole person and all over might instead be interpreted as examples of child-specific thoughts.

What we have presented this far hints of higher order thinking processes in children: they analyse, synthetise and produce ideas, so even in trying to understand death. The talk of target-depending thinking, synthetic thinking and integrative thinking is also a suitable way of talking about children’s thinking processes.

### 4.3. Suicide

Even regarding suicide, we find the idea of a dual outcome of life which we take as a sub-category in this connection. Given the negative views on suicide in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is common to believe that those who commit suicide are doomed to hell. It is convenient to believe that children in a secular country, but still one with a Lutheran/Protestant background, would think about suicide as having a dual outcome. Our informants expressed the idea of a dual outcome, but they did not seem to accept its either/or perspective. They were ambivalent in relation to suicide. Perhaps children are not either/or thinkers when it comes to questions of life and death? In this connection, a conversation two of the children had is interesting. They seem to respect life more than the outcome of going to hell:

They say you’ll go down to the devil when you die if you commit suicide. You can’t, you cannot know if it’s true that you go there, unless you have tried it yourself and it’s stupid to test it, to commit suicide (Child A).

You can do it (commit suicide), if you’re old and cannot live anymore. (...) But it’s best to wait till you die, because then you have the chance to live longer than when you kill yourself (Child B).

Children reason in a pragmatic/utilitarian way, they analyse the situation and take a stance. They come to conclusion that life is to be preferred before
committing suicide. Their thinking shows signs of synthetic thinking: bringing together ideas from their surroundings, for example that suicide is a bad thing, but still thinking on their own that we should show concern for those who choose to end their life by their own hand.

There is also the idea of going to heaven in relation to suicide. In this respect, the following conversation is illuminating. The children mentioned something that is written in the obituaries from time to time: See you in Nangijala! Nangijala is the place that represents heaven in the book The Brothers Lionheart.

It may be that they have just written it or so because they’ve heard it in The Brothers Lionheart. Perhaps people who commit suicide have been fooled (Child A).

What do you mean? (Researcher)

They may have been fooled, because if you get there (heaven), you must commit suicide (Child A).

The Nordic countries, including Sweden, have rather high suicide rates among both adults and young people compared to other countries. We believe that the children had heard about suicide in their societal context and about the dual outcome of life in relation to it. For their own part, children try to make sense of this phenomenon in their own societal context in terms of the synthetic thinking, two ideas that are combined with each other without seeming connection between them: 1) people go to heaven, 2) they must have been fooled to commit suicide! Two thoughts that for adult logic are hard to be combined!

4.4. Death penalty

The death penalty was a theme that engaged the children, they talked about it in terms of execution in the case of serious crime. They expressed various opinions: do not execute at all but understand and try to help; do not execute but put in jail or punish physically. The death penalty is a moral issue, and the question of justice arises:

You can execute someone sometimes; it depends on what he or she has done – a lot very, yes, very stupid (Child A).

What could it be then? (Researcher)

Start a war for example (Child A).

Here the child favours execution in the case of serious crime. Another thought that this is the wrong way to go:

Yes, you could have executions, but then it would only get worse. I think that everyone should live, even if you are a mean, mean, mean person (Child B).
I think they were allowed to chase Hitler, he had started many wars (Child A).

But if you execute a person who may have killed someone else, how will it be? You can put him in prison (Child C).

You don’t kill evil, you make them good. Ask why and then be nice. Executing makes it worse. Everyone has the right to live, even evil people (Child B).

Instead of execution, time in jail or physical punishment is expressed in the following way:

You could damage a leg. Or prod them with an electric gun (Child C).

As a reply, the second child pointed to the need to be understanding and provide help:

Don’t shoot at all, understand. Don’t shoot at all; it’s going to hurt. You should try to understand, in the worst case, prohibit or send the person away (Child B).

Underlying this conservation, the theme of justice (or being fair) is manifested: the children weighed different attitudes against each other; the good outweighs the bad. The existential/ethical question the children seemed to be pondering in relation to the death penalty was: ‘What is the right thing to do?’ In relation to this theme, children articulated meta-cognition (we saw signs of meta-cognition on several occasions). One child said:

Yes, I think, you shouldn’t execute, but the person should be punished until he or she understands that this thing was no good.

Discussing possible alternative punishments to execution, like shooting or hurting the person’s legs, one child felt a water gun was more appropriate than a real gun: ‘You should threaten with a water gun!’ Humour is a sign of meta-cognition even in relation to punishment and death; just consider Kierkegaard’s choice of style of writing! Children’s perception of death penalty is various, it astonished us that they were so keen in discussing this theme.

4.5 Killing animals and death of animals

Concerning killing animals, children spoke in the following terms: It is fair to kill; killing is acceptable with permission; do not kill endangered animals; kill animals that are injured or in pain. The following dialogue indicates these sub-categories:

Can you kill because it’s an animal? (Researcher)

Yes (Child A).

NO. If it’s endangered, it’s good you cannot kill them (Child C).
Hunters, they have permission, they have proof that they are hunters and know how many animals they are allowed to kill, they are not allowed to stand and shoot as many as they like (Child D).

The fact that animals die and are killed was a theme familiar to children. Some of them lived in the countryside, where their families had farming animals like horses and cows. The children had pets like hamsters, cats and dogs. They listened to what adults (some of whom hunt) have to say about killing animals. Especially in this case, their societal context had affected their understanding of killing animals. They expressed society-specific thoughts about death in this connection.

Children expressed feelings of loss in relation to animals. Children’s relationality does not only include relations to other human beings, but even relations to the more-than-human world: animals and other living things in their surroundings. In our study, some children spoke about the death of animals like hamsters, cats and horses, expressing how they missed the animals:

When it comes to death, they, I mean death, then I’m thinking about my hamster, a few years back, then it was, I had two hamsters, we had, one was my brother’s, and the other was mine, mine was Molly, my brother’s was Konrad, and Molly died first, she had an inflammation (...) Molly had been dead only a few weeks, so he (Konrad) was acting strange but he recovered and got healthy, but after two weeks he died, both died.

The question of animals’ right to life is not an abstract issue for children, nor is the right to death. The issue of animal rights (Waldau 2011) is part of their everyday life, at least for children who live in contexts where hunting is common. The killing of animals and those associations we find related to this theme are to be classed in the category of common ideas.

5. Discussion: child-specific thoughts about death and adult points of view

Our research shows that children at the age of 6–9 are able to express child-specific ideas, which cannot be placed within a general psychological developmental scheme and which are not taken from the surrounding cultural context. We were interested in what children have to say and how their statements could be understood from a societal/cultural perspective. One child spoke about death and the soul in the following way:

I believe that when you die, you become an angel and can transform yourself into whatever you like, whenever you want.

Here we find two components: an idea in line with the societal/cultural perspective (become an angel) and a child-specific idea about death (transformation). A child might combine the two facets of relationality: the outside-in perspective where s/he is affected by her/his surroundings and the idea-production happening spontaneously in the child. When a child says that after death we reach a stage
of transformation where ‘you can transform yourself into whatever you like, whenever you want,’ we are forced to characterise this as a spiritual child-specific perception produced by the child. Some children expressed a more naturalistic understanding when they stated: ‘we die and get buried, and that’s the end of it all.’ Our conclusion is that children’s understanding of death is diverse; influences from the outside affect their thoughts, at the same time as they also express their own child-specific ideas. There is not only an outside-in affection in children’s construction of ideas; children seem to construe their own child-specific views as well. The two facets might be kept apart, but they might also be mixed, given the synthetising and productive capabilities of the mind. It is common to characterise the recent educational stance as analytic, now things are changing, so also our understanding of children’s perceptions of death. Alterity (Levinas), diversity and self-production are some keywords in this change.

According to some researchers (Slaughter 2005; Bonoti, Leonardi, and Mastora 2013) understanding death is a difficult challenge for children. One important reason offered by Bonoti et al. is that ‘the concept of death is not a simple notion. It incorporates social and cultural beliefs, personal and emotional issues, religious assumptions, and conceptual understandings’ (2013, 47). Understanding death and trying to create meaning in the face of death combine multiple, many-layered conceptions. Our research confirms this interpretation. According to Zaloudikova:

Children often have incorrect and confused information about death that is influenced by their own experience. They are often confronted by situations in which the leading protagonist on television, in films, videogames, fairytales and other stories for children dies and then comes back to life. Death appears to be magical and determined by fate (2010, 129).

We doubt Zaloudikova’s point, as we did not find our respondents to be confused about death. Our material shows that the children had advanced and well-articulated child-specific thoughts about death already at the age of 6–9 years. The children expressed child-specific views that they had constructed on their own, without influence from their societal/cultural context: No one had told the children that, after death, you can transform yourself into whatever you like. Interpreting children’s ideas about death as incorrect and confused information is untenable.

6. Concluding remarks

Looking back to the research done we see two shortcomings: We could have separated between the minor children of 6 years and the elderly children of 7–8 years. It would have been interesting to see parallels and differences between these two groups. The second issue is that we did not do gender separation between how girls and boys think about death. In future research, we should take these issues in.
Creating meaning in relation to death is a complicated process, we agree, but perhaps the complexity is more in the eyes of adults than in the eyes of children. In trying to understand children’s thoughts about death, the adult perspective on children and the perspectives of children clash, and depending on researchers’ pre-understandings, the interpretation may be made from one perspective only. The influence of societal norms and values is evident, but this is only part of children’s understanding of death. Children position themselves, listen to each other’s arguments and present their own arguments without hesitation or/and anxiety. The anxiety in the face of death that is said to characterise the adult-like understanding of death is not found; there is no trace of Heideggerian being-for-death in children’s understanding of death. None of the children in our study was alarmed while reading about the death of Jonathan in *The Brothers Lionheart*, some of them thought that he would be transformed and could now do whatever he wanted.

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