



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIALT ARBETE

## Att säga sitt och höra till

En internationell studie om barns delaktighet i familjen

av

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Akademisk avhandling

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## Abstract

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An international study on children's participation in the family  
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Opportunities to participate are seen by many as a keystone of a good life and a well-functioning society. Participation by children has primarily been equated with the perception that children should have a 'voice', while participation in the sense of interactivity, being part of and doing things and taking on responsibility for others, has been omitted. In the thesis, it is argued that the emphasis on children having a voice is based in an individually oriented manner that may not be applicable to all children. For children living in societies that are more collectively oriented, participation may not primarily be about making decisions on their own or being able to speak for themselves. Rather participation can encompass doing things together and making decisions in a reciprocal way in which the individual is not at the centre. By broadening the concept of participation to include both decision-making processes and activities in the family, the thesis aims to explore how children from different parts of the world perceive their participation and what contextual factors might affect how children's participation is expressed.

Data are collected within the frame of the international research project Parenting Across Cultures (PAC) and consists of structured interviews with children and background data retrieved from their parents. Interviews were conducted with a sample of 1290 children (age  $M = 10.37$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ; 51% girls) from thirteen cultural groups in nine countries (China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand and the United States). The analysis process has included frequency analysis, factor analysis, multilevel analysis and bivariate analyses.

The results indicate that the two forms of participation are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, for most children they are positively linked: the more children participate in activities, the more they take part in decision-making and vice versa. Results also show that variations in participation are not mainly dependent on the cultural group or country to which the children belong. Instead, overall and individual socioeconomic conditions both appear to be decisive to the way participation is expressed. The more children's rights are realized and the safer children feel where they live, the more children perceive they participate in both decision-making and activities. At an individual level, however, the results indicate that if children live in hard socioeconomic circumstances in their families, there is a risk they will participate mainly in activities and lack influence in decision-making.

It is suggested that there are four possible participation positions for children in the family, with the different forms of participation being more or less prominent. Social workers are therefore recommended not to convey a one-sided discourse on participation based on a particular childhood ideology that emphasizes either the children's individual rights or their mutual obligations. When children of different backgrounds and traditions meet social work, keeping both aspects of participation in the air at the same time can be a more passable way to fulfil children's rights in their families.

The result also has implications for structural social work. One of the main findings is that children's feelings of safety where they live are clearly positively linked to participation in both decision-making and activities. Social work aimed at creating safe neighbourhoods can therefore be a key factor for children's participation, not only for increased involvement in the area in which they live, but also for giving children greater opportunities to have a say and engage in activities in their families.