
**Title: Emerging emotions in post-structural participant ethnography in education**

**Abstract**

The chapter, based on a fieldwork conducted in a small school in a reindeer herding village in Finnish Lapland, analyzes the emotions emerging in the researcher, in the participant teacher and in the community during reflexive participant ethnography in a sensitive school context. The chapter is informed by reflexive approaches which see the researcher as an essential part of the research, and by poststructuralist perspectives which acknowledge the constitutive effects of emotions as discursive practices. The chapter discusses the methodological implications of emotions for doing participant ethnography, suggesting that a range of ethical questions in participant ethnography can be addressed by attending to so called “positive actions” in the field. The chapter concludes that there is no space “outside” to research.

**Keywords:** participant ethnography, reflexive ethnography, emotions, poststructuralism, teacher, rural school

Maija Lanas has conducted participant ethnography in marginalized northern areas and in Finnish in-service teacher education. In both contexts she has studied emerging emotions and subjectification, and established ways to navigate various challenging emotions in educational contexts.
Introduction

This chapter is based on a reflexive participant ethnography conducted in a small school in a reindeer herding village in Finnish Lapland above the Arctic Circle. In participant ethnography the researcher takes part in the surroundings pursuing some level of immersion in the field. The village school in which the ethnography was conducted was, at the time, a forum for multiple personal, local and societal sensitive issues and conflicts, all of which contributed to the emergence of multiple challenging emotions in the participating community - including the researcher - during the fieldwork. Conducting reflexive participant ethnography in this context meant finding ways to be sensitive to multiple emotional issues.

This chapter is informed by poststructuralist perspectives of emotion, which acknowledge the constitutive effects of emotions as discursive practices (Zembylas, 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2007b). Discourses are understood as bodies of ideas that produce and regulate the world in their own terms, rendering some things common sense and other things nonsensical (Youdell, 2006, p. 36). Seeing emotions as discursive practices means that emotions not only emerge within but also produce specific discourses.

Although researchers’ emotions in the field and with research participants are increasingly recognised as a part of the research process, they are still often seen as external to the research (Davies, 1999; Lumsden, 2009; Mosselson, 2010). Researchers’ emotions are not commonly discussed openly, and personally engaging with emotions still often carries an air of ‘unprofessionalism’ in research. Reflexive researchers contrast this notion by positing that researchers’ emotions, be what they may, are an integral part of the research. Here, reflexivity in research refers to two things: 1) A form of research that fully acknowledges and utilizes a researcher’s subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research (Davies, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Mosselson, 2010). 2) Critical reflection on the broader theoretical, cultural, political, ideological, and narrative contexts of the interaction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 269).

In reflexive participant ethnography, the researchers construct the field on which they tread. In other words, the field is not just “there”, waiting to be found and documented, but it responds to a particular researcher in a particular way, just like the researcher responds to the field in a particular way. Emotions are a part of these responses, and in the process both, the field and the researcher are transformed. Thus, there is no “recipe” for participant ethnography, but it is relies on a constant...
negotiation and a never-ending process of seeking for appropriate ways of doing research (Lanas & Rautio, 2014; Puroila, Estola, & Syrjälä, 2012). In this chapter, based on the fieldwork in a village school, I will propose that when constructing the field, the researcher can navigate the emerging emotions by pursuing ‘positive actions’ in the field. Secondly, I will also discuss how the researcher may be appropriated by participants in the field in unprecedented ways, which has an emotional toll on the researcher.

The chapter contributes to the emerging poststructural body of research which explores how research itself produces subjectivities for both the researcher as well as participants. Taking the perspective that researcher not only represents reality but produces it, the chapter concludes that in participant ethnography, there is no space outside the research.

Poststructuralist take on emotions
In poststructural approaches, the line between the outside and the inside of an individual, between the Self and the Other, is seen as ambiguous. The subject (one’s self) is seen as discursive constitution, something that we both receive and do. We receive it from each new other we encounter (in the given power relations), and we do it by taking on, performing and resisting various positions as a subject in various discourses. Depending on how discourses intersect (e.g. ethnicity, gender, class, cultures, geography), various subject positions are available to us. Different positions carry with them different opportunities for using power, and ‘come with’ different emotions. This process of taking on and performing subject positions while constituting self is deeply intertwined with emotions and with questions of “having” the right emotions and not having others. In this way, emotions are not additional or external to the process of making selves, but constitute selves. This approach to emotions includes three main aspects.

Firstly, instead of viewing emotions simply as individual, private possessions or as sociocultural constructions, poststructuralist approaches view them as both: as personal and as emerging within specific material-discursive contexts. Moreover, it is argued that such both/and conceptual schema perpetuates assumed boundaries between the individual and the social by affirming their separate territories (Zembylas & Fendler, 2007). Instead of drawing boundaries between the individual and the social, poststructural approaches allow one to recognize that “where one begins and the other ends is not clear; there are crossovers between you and me, here and there, inside and outside.” (Game, 1997, p. 394). Furthermore, it is precisely through the movement of emotions that the very
distinction between inside and outside, or the individual and the social, is effected in the first place (Ahmed, 2004b; Ahmed, 2004a, p. 28).

Secondly, poststructuralist perspective views emotions as performative (Ahmed, 2004a; Thien, 2005; Zembylas, 2007b). Emotions do not simply exist; they are brought into existence by ‘doing’ them, by performing them. Moreover, emotional practices produce “a” reality. “The words used to describe emotions are not simply names for ‘emotion entities’, pre-existing situations with coherent characteristics; rather, these words are themselves ‘actions or ideological practices’ that serve specific purpose in the process of creating and negotiating reality.” (Zembylas 2005, p. 937).

Emotional expressions are not only performative but also productive, they make individuals into socially and culturally specific persons engaged in complex web of power relations.

Thirdly, emotions reflect societal power relations. Emotions are, to some extent, products of previous experiences, influenced by social, historical, and cultural contexts (Zembylas 2007a). Like habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), emotions are embodied history internalized as second nature, and so, forgotten as history (Williams, 1977; Zembylas, 2007a). Power relations are a part of all discourses about emotions because they determine what can, cannot or must be said about self and emotion, what is taken to be true or false about them, and what only some individuals can say about them. In this way, emotions are not only shared by groups or individuals, but also significant in the formation and maintenance of political and social subjectivities. Emotion discourses establish, assert, challenge or reinforce power or status differences (Zembylas 2005, p. 937).

People choose from various discourses in which specific social, cultural, emotional, and historical positions are available to them, or act to resist those discourses. Emotions emerging in, for example, the teacher, the parents, the students and the researcher, link to the subject positions available to each in the given context, telling something about the discursive context. The researcher’s emotions are thus not private or external to the research process, but emerge through negotiations with the particular surroundings. Different research methods and methodological approaches have potentially different levels of emotional involvement - in participant ethnography, the researcher is emotionally implicated in the field.
Research context

The participant ethnography from which this chapter draws was conducted in a small Lappish reindeer herding village school as a part of a larger research project “Life in Place”. The purpose of the project was to learn more about the lives and the educational contexts in northern rural villages. As a part of this project, my research focused on analyzing how popular representations of rural northern youth, of their surroundings and of their actions impacted student lives in school. I conducted school ethnography for 4½ months, living in the village with my partner and two children (not yet in school). Prior to the field work I had visited the village with a team of researchers, discussing the goals and local usefulness of the research, and we had conducted 25 narrative interviews in the village with the help of locally hired research assistant. During the field work I and my family participated in the everyday life in the village. I spent 2-7 hours in the school daily, observing and actively participating in discussions with teachers and students, and taking part in everything to which I was invited, and initiated new activities together with the people in the school. That year, the number of full time teachers in the school had decreased to one. The teacher was engaged in the reflexivity, which was rewarding to both of us (see also Gildersleeve, 2010 for engaging participants in the reflection). With the students I talked, played, visited their homes, and engaged in various activities initiated by them: watched YouTube, made the school paper, played games, looked at pictures... I also met all parents more than once, making it clear that they could approach me any time if they had any wishes or concerns about the research or my presence.

The reindeer herding village school proved to be a very sensitive context for conducting ethnography. There were silenced yet locally well-known emotional issues that had long historical roots and that all contributed to the emotional undercurrents in the field: personal-social issues such as traumas (Lanas, 2011a), conflicts between the school and the village (Lanas 2008), and lack of representative power in northern villages which tend to be represented as the national other (Eriksson, 2010; Lanas, Rautio, & Syrjala, 2013; Ollila, 2008; Ridanpää, 2007). Mainly, navigating the field required two acknowledgements about local emotions.

Firstly, the national issues, such as economic and cultural inequality of northern and southern Finland manifested for example in the economic imbalance between reindeer herders and south-trained school teachers. In the past years, the locals had experienced that the teachers tended to overlook some crucial and relevant life-skills of the students, or treat these as problematic. These included for example hunting, fixing motors, driving motorized vehicles or being absent from
school to go reindeer roundups. In addition, there were cultural differences, generally unrecognized in national education and resulting in the invisibility of reindeer herding culture in national education. Furthermore, the perspective of child was different in the village and in the school. Whereas in the village, children were treated as reindeer herders, active and responsible participants in the community, in school they were expected to take on a position as submissive child, which they experienced as demeaning (Lanas, 2011b; Lanas & Kiilakoski, 2013; Lanas et al., 2014). As the result, there had been severe disagreements between villagers and school representatives of the purposes and methods of education, resulting in multiple open and emotional conflicts between school and villagers.

Secondly, the social-personal issues such as substance abuse and deaths through own hand or that of another, were implicitly present in the school. While such issues were no more common in the village than in other places in Finland, the community was tight-knit, and all local traumas had an impact on most of the villagers for at least a decade or more. These traumas surfaced in the everyday life of the school. For example, children’s bickering during recess could escalate into a full-blown conflict, if there were unresolved traumatic issues between the children’s families. Even when parents anticipated and tried to prevent such escalations, their actions easily seemed like overreacting and irrational to a teacher unfamiliar with the emotional undercurrents in the village.

Emotions linked to these broader national inequalities between north and south as well as to the local traumas were performed in the everyday in the village and in the school. As I engaged with the villagers and with the teachers, I felt the tug and pull of these various emotions.

“Positive actions” as methodological choices
When conducting reflexive participant ethnography, the researcher cannot be fully prepared. Accepting this requires submitting to the flux of a research process without being able to entirely anticipate the outcome. The issues are navigated step by step in the field, each step constructing the field on which the researcher treads. For this reason, reflexive researchers in general tend to see research ethics as central for trustworthiness in research, and speak of relational ethics rather than procedural ethics (Rallis, 2010; Hyry-Beihammer, Estola & Syrjälä, 2012). In participant ethnography, the relationships become the data (Davies, 1999) and the emotions emerging in me are a part of these relationships. While, on the one hand, my emotions felt extremely personal and as
something to be hidden in my personal diaries, on the other hand they emerged as a part of the discursive context.

As I entered the village with my family, I found myself amongst multiple combinations of different positions and emotions linked to the societal power relations. I carried some subject positions in my body: I was a woman, young, short, a mother, I looked like locals, in a heterosexual relationship. Others were meanings inscribed for example in my demeanor, background and family ties: I was a representative of education, a southerner, a university person, a researcher, a wife to a man who stayed at home with the children while I worked. These different positions linked to different discourses and shared emotions. For example, it was one of the only contexts in the world in which I was defined and addressed as a “southerner” (my regular home is located 200 km south from the Arctic Circle). As described above, there was a power inequality between south and north. Thus, to the word “southerner”, multiple layers of power-relations were inscribed, as well as emotions linked to these power relations.

The intersections of various subject positions allowed entrance various discussions: as a representative of the school I had access to the teachers’ coffee tables, as a mother I had access to the mothers’ stories in the village, as a researcher, in turn, I had access to the stories of injustices locals wished to make public. In each, different emotions became performed, and through performing the emotions, discourses were produced and resisted. In this way, once I was in the field and in the discussions, I was appropriated in the performing of various emotions and producing or resisting discourses. - The choices I made in the field similarly acted to perform and resist various discourses. For example, when discussing with a visiting teacher, it became apparent that she expected me to position myself hierarchically in relation to the village, as southern and educated, thus trying to base our relationship on a shared sense superiority and constructions of the villagers as “Other”. I tried to find alternative bases for our relationship.

In participant ethnography there are no “right” answers or “right” actions. However, when trying to navigate among various discourses, actions should be respecting and appreciative to all participants in the field. I have suggested elsewhere (Lanas & Rautio, 2014), that relational ethics could be seen as sharing ‘positive actions’ during the research. These ‘positive actions’ rely on the effort to signal respect and appreciation to each other, and acknowledge the others’ efforts to do the same. However, what respect and appreciation might mean and how they might be communicated, cannot be pre-decided because respect and appreciation can only be defined through the relationship.
‘Positive actions’ can thus be characterized as a constant question directed at itself: what would be a positive action in this context, right now? Thereby, analysing what entails a positive action requires alertness to the field and to how these ‘positive actions’ evolve.

To begin with, I focused on listening to everyone: If a name presented itself to me in discussions, I made sure to introduce myself to the carrier of the name, so that our relationship (whether distant or close) would be one based on the act of listening. I also invested effort into listening to various ways of communicating. These ways were not always verbal. Especially in the case of children and youth, some communication seemed, at first, as not communication at all and was in risk to be overlooked. For example,

*My time here is 3/4 gone. For my first two months here, Joni didn’t make any contact with me outside of casual jokes and comments. I have taken this to mean that he is not interested in establishing any kind of relationship with me. I have resisted the urge to change this by pushing him towards making contact with me so that I would meet my own criteria for a good adult/researcher/professional educator (and thus reflecting me as a good adult to reckon with). I have kept to my decision to focus on ‘listening’, and haven’t tried to push it with him.*

*Today, Joni asked me to help him staple the school paper. I joined him in the office. He closed the door. We sat on the floor for over an hour, neither one of us saying a word. (I took my lead from him.) We heard only the clatter of two staplers, with an occasional laugh when a staple went awry. It was a warm hour, like a quiet, still water in the middle of rapids. After that, he asked me to help him every time he was stapling. I realised that while I had interpreted his actions as him not establishing a relationship, he was, in fact, establishing a relationship in which he was comfortable: one based on silent respect of space, and in which we could share a space quietly and peacefully.*

Attending to the emotions in the situation ultimately helped me understand how Joni navigated the challenging emotions at the center of which he often was in school: He ‘cut out spaces’ for himself in his everyday life in school (Lanas & Corbett, 2011). I was allowed in such a space once he had decided I would not disturb it.
Although positive actions are defined within the parameters of each relationship, they must acknowledge the implications to other relationships. Sometimes I could not respond to participants as they hoped, as in the case of the visiting teacher described above.

**Being appropriated for transformation and transforming self**

As I became a part of the participants’ everyday lives, the participants utilized or ‘appropriated’ aspects of the research and my existence in the village in their lives (see also Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). I was appropriated in ways I could not predict and which had emotional consequences for me. For example, students who had previously lacked the space to express their emotions and tell their stories in the school felt empowered after being heard (by me), and eventually used this new empowerment to bully the visiting teacher with whom they had had difficulties. Also, since I lived in the village and since our children played together, the parents trusted me, whereas they did not initially trust the schoolteacher (since she was a representative of the school). Therefore, as the practices in the school began improving, the parents attributed many of the positive changes in the school to my being in the school, even though the changes that took place were actually the teacher’s (Lanas & Zembylas, 2015). After being initially very troubled by this, I ultimately began to see this phenomenon as not about me and credit, but as an essential part of the process. The families appropriated me as a ‘mediator of trust’ until they had established a trusting relationship with the teacher and the school (Lanas & Kiilakoski, 2013). The appropriation of an outsider researcher provided an opportunity for the field to change itself. The process was emotional:

“The teacher is so afraid. She is constantly worried that a parent will suddenly storm in and yell at her for something, because that’s what has always happened. She is sure that the parents hate her. I tell her they’re all on the same side. She is suspicious. Then I worry at night: what if I’m wrong. What if everything will turn out bad again this year and they will hate each other again? She is in such turmoil and I feel she puts so much effort in changing it all now, and so much trust in my being here and helping her through it. What if I can’t? What if I fail at this task I never took on? Or, what if she gets tired of the change she is trying to make in the school culture, and turns back to the old ways, with the threats, put downs, arrests, and talking down to parents and children? How could I sit here watching as children throw up in the middle of the school day again, just because it’s too much for them? What if I can’t stop it from happening? And worse, what if I’ve given everyone false hopes by having a positive attitude?” (Field journal)
The emotional discursive context is not limited to the village. Participant ethnography which produces new knowledge is essentially a transformative process also to the researcher. For example, when conducting research in rural North, it is not only the representations of rural North that become challenged, but various discourses within which ‘rural north’ is signified become questioned, simultaneously challenging the researcher’s self constituted within these very same discourses. For example, when the participants criticized the discourses and representations that portrayed rural North as ‘remote’ or ‘lacking progress’, they also criticized popular conceptualizations of ‘center’, and contemporary education’s take on ‘progress’ and on situations in which ‘success’ can occur (Lanas, Rautio & Syrjälä, 2012).

As I presented my research in national and international forums, I was repeatedly struck by how static the perceptions of northern villages in the academic community were, and how eager the academic community was to maintain these perceptions. This had less to do with rural villages and more to do with how the academic community wanted to see itself in relation to rural villages: successful, progressive, vivid. In this way, being constituted within and by the research relationship is not only an issue for the research participants but also for the researcher.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described participant ethnography as a process in which researcher not only makes decisions regarding the field, but may also be appropriated by participants. The ways in which the researcher may be appropriated is not entirely under the researcher’s control. For the surprising situations that may occur in the field, there is no ready recipe or “right” answers. However, the researcher can approach the situations by attending to the “positive actions”.

Attending to “positive actions” is a methodological as well as ethical exercise, since making judgments about what “positive actions” in the field might entail, requires alertness to the meanings particular to the field.

I will conclude by suggesting that the researcher’s responsibility for ‘positive actions’ does not end with the field work. Everything a researcher claims about a field of ethnography produces some discourse - a discourse within which both, the researcher and the field are constituted. In other words, there is no ‘outside’ of the research, no pure space from which the researcher can make claims. I have tried to be sensitive to this by imagining all my participants in my audience whenever I write or talk about the field. With this, it is important to recognize that being sensitive to emotions...
does not mean silencing them. The main thrust of the research was that emotions do not stay outside the walls of school buildings, or outside the researcher, but are nevertheless generally unrecognized and silenced within schools. Had I chosen to silence stories that were told to me, I would have acted out of my own worry or insecurity at the face of publishing these emotions, not at the request of those sharing them with me. Therefore, I would have continued the culture of silencing difficult emotions (and thus silencing difficult societal issues) from educational discussion. So as not to do this, I chose to be open about the personal and sensitive emotions shared with me.

References


