

## GETTING TO PLACES

### The ethics of research and fieldwork in villages – first visits

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- Maija:** *Let's make this into a thank-you-card to Seppo. Should we all sign our names? What should I [write]...? "Thank you for your time... Seppo"?*
- Eila:** *Should it say "Warm thank you..."? And you could write, couldn't you, something like "Researchers from Oulu"?*
- Maija:** *But shouldn't we sign our names anyway, now that we're all here? Do we have time?*
- Everyone:** *Yes, we have time...*

Several senior researchers, two professors and a herd of other more or less experienced researchers of education go to do multidisciplinary research in a village. This is what they find themselves thinking about: what to write on a thank-you card for a village elder! It is this micro scale of research ethics that we have been faced with in our research. We have a good command, we think, of research ethics overall and with larger issues. But how to tackle the minute, albeit very important ones that arise when in the villages? This paper is an illustration of such issues as a collection of individual and shared thoughts, memories, open questions, stories of experiences and quotes from field notes.

### Dreaming about going to the field

Looking back at our research plan of *Place and environment in the stories of Northern people – On the borderline between global and local* for Thule Institute in their research programme Circumpolar Health and Well-being, it echoes voices of strong enthusiasm and optimism. This is what we wrote:

*This multidisciplinary research project aims at giving voice to Northern people and understanding their lives in the middle of globalisation and localisation. The common interest of researchers in this research group is the concern to study and maintain the well-being of people living in the North. The project will focus on the experiences of how people feel and make sense of the changing social and physical environment and future expectations, and how they tell their identities. More specifically, the purpose of the research project is to produce new knowledge of Northern peoples' experienced health and wellbeing, and about their hopes and expectations for the future and about the*

*environmental awareness and sense of place. We will adopt a narrative-biographical approach, which offers a wide repertoire of methodological tools for listening to various voices of people about places, past, present and future. By focusing on the experiences of the Northern people themselves the project can strengthen the Northern identity and give hope for the future.*

## **Going to the field**

It has been almost three years since we wrote the quoted research plan. This is the second year of our project. We have visited our participating two villages all together six times. We have collected data of many kinds in many situations: interviews, group discussions, village evenings, children's drawings and writings, photographs, field diaries and correspondence. It is obvious that we have had and still have important ethical issues to work with.

The responsibility of a researcher in narrative inquiry is to protect the privacy of her participants and to respect those whose lives she is exploring. This might seem obvious but in practice is a responsibility ladden with troublesome choices and decisions. (Josselson 2007, 537.) The ethical basis of any research that has to do with other people as participants is grounded in the relationship between the researcher(s) and the participant(s). But in this particular project, we as researchers are a large group of people from many backgrounds, ages, beliefs and mind-sets. The relationships between all of us are an essential part of how we function and carry out the research. It is thus not only between a researcher and a participant but also between the multitude of researchers themselves that the relationships form an ethical ground to a project.

The group has grown; researchers have come and already gone. Thoughts and ideas change as time goes by. Do we all agree on our goals? Re-thinking and revising as time passes is important. Let us quote the research proposal briefly once more.

*...research project aims at giving voice to Northern people...*

Do these people not have a voice? Who are we to claim that we can give them a voice? These are questions that two of the youngest members of our research group pondered over a coffee one evening. A shared concern of the whole group is and should continue to be to consider what we have promised, both to the ones funding us and to the villagers.

*...the concern to study and maintain the well-being of people living in the North.*

To study someone's wellbeing is hard enough. Why did we claim to maintain it as well? What are we doing to maintain the people's wellbeing? Do they even want us there maintaining it? Maybe they are doing just fine without us there!

*...is to produce new knowledge of Northern peoples' experienced health and wellbeing, and about their hopes and expectations for the future and about the environmental awareness and sense of place.*

We have set out to do so many things. Have we promised too much?

Ethically grounded relationships are based on caring and responsibility about the other's wellbeing. However, the researcher is also responsible to her community of fellow scientists. This double responsibility can cause conflicts. The way to deal with this is openness. Researchers should acknowledge and bring forth moments of confusion and conflict having to do with this double

responsibility. When thinking about how common these instances in any research project along the way are, the lack of such reflection in literature is very curious. (Josselson 2007, 538.)

## Our research ethics – the bigger picture

*As we arrive to Suwanto for the first time, we approach the village in a way from behind. We drive along a small, bumpy road, not sure whether it will take us to the village or not. We have already had to phone a couple of times and inform the villagers that we will be arriving late. When driving to Raattama, the other village, there was a brand new paved road leading us straight where we wanted. This is an interesting feeling: arriving to a village you don't know, aiming to learn something new from the people and their lives in these villages.*

- Leena

Our main commitments concerning research ethics can be described as two kinds. On one hand we have to take into consideration the so-called 'official' research ethics, such as voluntariness, anonymity, responsibility, not doing harm and so forth. On the other hand we have to apply an ethics of caring as well. This kind of ethics emphasises the uniqueness of situations, dialogue and responsiveness (Noddings 1982, Elbaz-Luwish et al. 2002; Syrjälä et al. 2006). As we understand it, an inquiry concerning other people, their stories and lives, is not research from the outside looking in. We take our inquiry to be an encounter based on caring, a co-production of knowledge and involving constant critical observing of our work. We have tried to build relationships with the villagers where we as researchers could be empathetic and sensitive listeners rather than traditional interviewers. But this is not always as easy in practice as it is in theory.

*I don't want to be an empathetic listener! I want to be a friend, a mate, to tell also about myself and to be one hundred percent there, in the mood I happen to be in. On the other hand: I'm nobody's true friend and everybody knows that i'm a researcher. Finding my place is not easy.*

- From Pauliina's fieldnotes

There is no switch in us that reads "empathetic and sensitive listening" that we can turn on whenever interviewing. We as researchers are as much human beings as our participants. Some times we are too tired, too overwhelmed about some other things or just unable to connect with our participants so that the empathy and sensitivity just are not there. In her eagerness to conduct good research the researcher might, for example, be too concerned with her own role to be able to fully hear the participants.

*When entering a village as a researcher I am on the firing line, I am so incredibly visible. It worries me. I know I'll react by turning into the hysteric squirrel again. I'm not just representing myself but the entire research. Still I am giving an impression of myself, not only to the participants but also to the other researchers.*

- From Maija's fieldnotes

Most times, we would guess, it is a combination of a variety of feelings that we encounter our participants with. These feelings cannot be denied and the interview situation idealised. Feelings have to be acknowledged and accounted for. (See Thomson 2004.) What is also important to remember when talking about "relationships" and "caring", is that inspite of this approach, we are not true friends or therapists of our participants. At some point our research is done and we will leave the village.

There should be negotiations with the participants already in the beginning of a research project: about their rights and about the practicalities concerning the process. We should inform our participants of our plans throughout the project – not just their part as our "informants" when we press the "rec" button. They should know about our research questions, assumptions, analyses and reporting of results as we have planned them and as they change along the way. If we say we base our ethics of inquiry on

caring, we must be responsible also of how to report results so as not to hurt or harm our participants. This does not however mean that we can say nothing the villagers won't agree with. We most likely will end up with some ideas and conclusions that will not please our participants. What we have to remember when this happens is to make clear that our thoughts are our own and that the participants (might) disagree with us – and should we know what their stance is, we should also report their opposing ideas and views.

As a whole, the building of relationships between researchers and participants is a long process, akin to the formation of any important relationship. With some participants, a good relationship has been easy to build and maintain right from the start. Some of our very first contacts have become kind of key-informants to us. While this is good from our perspective, it needs further thought when doing research in a very small village. Whose voice do we end up listening to? What if someone is interviewed many times over many field trips and someone else only once and never returned to? What if someone is not interviewed at all? It does not take very much of our prized empathy to understand that feelings of wonder and being left out – to say the least – can occur.

In our previous research we have looked at encounters between teachers and their pupils (Uitto & Syrjälä 2007). Encounters – meeting or mismeeting (see Bauman 1993, 145-185 – borrowing from Martin Buber) were revealed as actions imbued with power, based on caring and appearing as embodied. Much the same way that they can be thought of in the relationship between a researcher and her participant. For instance, we found ourselves wondering what to wear or how to meet and greet the villagers. None of us spoke out loud about our concerns over the choice of clothing but once this issue came up sometime somewhere we quickly noticed that almost everyone had troubled their minds over something so – simple.

### **In the boots of a researcher – in the eyes of the villagers.**

*Early morning and lots of driving behind us. An exciting situation: new people, new project, new job. ...We've finally arrived to Suvanto. Beautiful place, reindeer on fields, red houses. A nice man and a little dog there to meet us. A story about an old dog that was to be put asleep but that ran away the night before his destiny.*

*The first concrete feeling of distance or displacement: I am a vegetarian in the midst of these reindeer-stews and hunters. I take a look around the café. They sell lovely woollen socks here. Suddenly I become painfully aware of my appearance. I'm wearing leather boots, a skirt and a blouse. But it's not me, not really! I have more wool socks and long trousers at home than skirts and blouses – by far. I feel awkward.*

*[time passes from midday to evening, I rush to change to jeans and a pullover at the first instance]*

*I've just been interviewing two women in one of their homes. Warm and nice. I was wearing the right clothes this time. It had started to snow outside and the husband, Reino looked at my boots as I was leaving and commented, "It is good that you're wearing such high boots". I felt good and accepted.*

*- Pauliina*

When talking about equality we are also talking about power. In an inquiry based on co-operation, power takes form in very concrete and practical issues. Equality is not guaranteed by any agreements – written or oral – but by the way we conduct our research in practice. Elizabeth B. Moje (2000, 28) discusses similar issues as what we have found ourselves wondering, in her article on the relations between power and the body. Thinking about what to wear so as to appear as someone the villagers can relate to but at the same time not pretending to be them, is not insignificant or simple at all.

*Before going to the field I located myself as a researcher from the city, but having lived my whole life in Ostrobothnia, a Northerner all the same! This meant that I can survive the climate, I can wear the right things and I'm not afraid of the frost. What I am afraid of though are dark, lonely roads, sleeping alone in a cabin in the middle of a deserted camping site, at the outskirts of a village. But I thought that as a Northerner I would overcome these should there be need. And there surely was a need for all of this. Someone I had interviewed commented amusedly "Oh, so you have a downjacket also!". And when the village gathering that us researchers had called together was over, everyone scattered around the village roads in their cars. I found myself walking alone in a frosty night, along an empty road, in just moonlight, to a lonely camping-site of empty cottages. Never came no wolf across – nor anything else either.*

*- Aila*

According to Freema Elbaz-Luwisch (1997, 79) in a narrative inquiry of teachers there is always inequality between the academic researchers of education and teachers as the practitioners of education as the latter are not as appreciated in an academic hierarchy. This is an issue we cannot ignore even if we are not studying teachers. We can't escape the fact that we are professors, doctoral students and doctors of education – that is, professionals of a field. There are noticeable socio-economic differences between some of us and some of our participants. Even if none of these facts bore any value to us, they might do to some of our participants.

At the core of any researcher's professional skills should lay acknowledgment of ethical issues concerning her inquiry. In a narrative inquiry this is emphasised as we are studying people's lives, probing very personal issues and being able to potentially hurt someone emotionally. This constant awareness and observation of one's doings and not-doings as a researcher – as much as it is needed – feels like a burden sometimes. It makes us at times insecure and endlessly doubting and questioning ourselves.

*I see that the price list of the village café is translated to English. In the English part ice cream is spelled 'ice gram'. I'm amused and take a picture of the wall with the list pinned on it. Right after I'm upset with myself – I wonder if I have an arrogant attitude, if I think I'm somehow better. I don't want this – I don't think it is the case.*

*- Pauliina's fieldnotes*

*The process is running. Four women of Suvanto have agreed to keep an eye on everything that they find beautiful and tell me. I do the same and tell them. We exchange thoughts every 15th day of a month. The first round has been made. I wrote a long and contemplating letter, drawing in the context – history and theory – and every once in a while returning to Toppilansaari (where I live) and inside my own skin. I commented on this and on that and kept on blabbering about all kinds of things. That's how I feel now. I also told them about the debate going on in the local newspaper Kaleva and quoted my comment that I sent to the editor-in-chief. In this comment I said – purposefully trying to provoke the editor – that a person's idea about what is beautiful uncovers their values in life. This has bothered me for some time now. When the women of Suvanto read my letter and this comment as part of it – no matter to whom it was addressed and in what purpose provocatively worded – they might have read and thought also that I'm aiming to uncover and judge their values. What if they don't write freely anymore? Have I ruined the whole thing? I should just ask them. But will it make things worse? Will it sound like excuses?*

*- Pauliina's research diary*

Feelings of insecurity like these quoted are not rare among us. Aila, a doctor of education and a lecturer at our university, describes a village gathering that the researchers had called together during one fieldtrip as exciting. She was excited to see her name mentioned in a poster about the evening at the notice board of a village grocery shop. Once the people had shown up, Aila knew she had to be the one to lead the conversation, but felt very timid and unworthy for this task. Especially when sitting next to a village elder, a man that everyone seemed to respect. She describes feeling like a little girl.

And we also sound like little girls, most of us: we are thinking about what to wear, running to change our skirts to jeans and blouses to pullovers, we're happy when a "native" comments acceptingly about our boots or jackets, we're questioning our motives and wondering what people think of us and how they understand or misunderstand us. When people feel insecure they often escape to any source of security. This source of security could easily be our position as researchers, outsiders, academics, important observers. Maybe girliness is just the kind of ethical attitude that is needed. The stepping down from high horses of academia and daring to wonder about small things, daring to experience, enduring the emotions of littleness.

### **Inside looking in – the thoughts of Marikaisa**

*I was bothered by my modest knowledge of the recent history of Lapland. All the things a researcher should know before going to the field...!?*

*- Aila*

Should we know a lot before going to the field? Or should we jump in blindly? Or what if a villager herself took a look at her village? To make things more complicated – or should we say challenging – ethicswise, we have in our research group a doctoral student who has been both a researcher and a participant, living in one of the villages we study. In this chapter she is reflecting on her dual-role.

*Marikaisa:*

I was asked to write a short story about being a researcher and at the same time a participant in my own community – in a village part of this research project. I should have asked this question myself already a half a year ago when this all started. It has been an interesting process, much deeper, than I would have thought in advance. But here is my short story, I thank Pauliina for asking me to write!

It's nearly nine years when it happened, this new episode in my life started. It was not planned or dreamed of, it just happened. As I believe everything happens for a reason so did, and still does, the understanding that my home is here: in a small Lappish village in the middle of pure nature. Far away from the academic world where I used to live. I have described my move away from the city life and the academic world as a start of the real life. The greatest reason for this feeling is that here in the village the nature has, even nowadays, a very dominant role.

Since my move I've been working in a tiny kindergarten in the village. My role has been "the child-care-person" of the village. All these years I've been wondering about the village life, how it all works out, what is the uniqueness of this community? What makes this place so important for me?

Some six months ago I got an opportunity to get back to the academic world. Our village was invited to participate in a research project. I was asked to work as a research assistant in the project. My role was to be a local link between the villagers and the researchers from the university. I liked the idea of the project, and was happy to get involved in it. One of my very first thoughts was that this is again a new way to get more involved into the community. At the same time I was very conscious that a new job would give me also a new role in the community. What the role would be was uncertain. How would it feel to be a researcher of one's own village and on the other hand an informant/participant in it? I wasn't afraid of this change since my position in the village has changed many times in the past years.

When I organised the first meeting for researchers and villagers here in the village the reception was varying, some were very keen and most were sceptic quite openly: "Who would come to a meeting like

that?" or "I doubt if people get interested in it". I understand that we are approaching these people with a very abstract and difficult topic that is far away from their daily concerns. For many of them this type of research seems superficial and thus of secondary importance. "Who would be interested in my stories and why? It is just my life." I quickly understood I should become a salesman of this project if we wanted to succeed.

Knowing people in the village I was a bit sceptic of how they would like the idea and how they would be willing to participate. I had a feeling that they would 'try' us by not giving us easy entrance. These people are not so easy to approach. I have anyhow asked some people to participate in our research. Mostly starting with people I knew would accept my invitation. In some sense I have had power to choose the informants. Has the final criteria then been my "feeling" of who would be so much my friend that she/he would let us hear his/her story? I don't know but anyhow nearly all the people I have asked have been willing to participate.

The depth of the stories collected in my village has varied. I have still had a feeling that the people have trusted me. Trust all in all has been a very important topic in this village during the past winter. There have been conflicts between the villagers and the school here. During the interviews I have made, people have said "...as you know how it is, living here". I have a feeling that some people would like the interviewer to be me and others would prefer it to be someone else – someone from the outside. Some people have asked about this directly and chosen who they want to tell their stories to.

I was willing to tell my life story too. How was it to be a participant? It is a relieving role. I can now understand the nature of narrative research through my own experience. To be an informant means a moment for reflecting one's thoughts and to structure and even give meaning to one's life. When talking about your own life, telling crystallises some events and leaves some with less importance. At best being a participant in a narrative research project can be a cathartic experience.

As a conclusion about being a researcher in one's own community and being an informant at the same time: it sure is a very contradictory role. There is no objective way to work. There are open questions: When am I a villager, when a researcher? Which part of my thinking is that of a villager and which of a researcher? My strong belief is an attempt to get some clarification into my situation is to keep writing a research diary. This way my perspective, be it how mixed and confused, will be open for scrutiny. And this way I myself will be able to go back to my thoughts and see how they develop. I could share the words of Judith Oakley (1996, 23) "I had to learn another language in the words of my mother tongue.". During this project I have begun to see the life of this village with new eyes. This project will and has already made my decision to keep my life here stronger. I'm privileged to be able to study my own village and community with respect and love.

### **To listen, to relate and to understand?**

*After the first visit in these villages I had the impression of two different places. The one was like a painting, 'still life' would be the kind, no doubt. The other village was more fragmented, multivoiced and in my mind, more lively. I felt so much an outsider in both villages, a tourist, how could I ever be able to understand these people? Which stories would have resonance with my story???? I was confused. After six months I travelled again to the bigger village to interview parents. I met mothers. And suddenly their stories echoed with my mother story. Some less some more, but in any case, I was able to share the joy and the concerns mothers have.*  
- Eila

As does Eila, also Aila thinks about resonances, similarities and differences. She remembers going to the field, in the middle of Lapland, to a small village as a leap. This leap, for her, was of a greater

distance than with any other experiences of interviewing people she had had before. The expectation of sameness (Taajamo 1996) was there with some things but with others, such as the environment with all of its meanings and connotations, the everyday life, work or dialect that Aila encountered, made her feel very different as well.

*I look around as Pirjo is talking. Her kids obviously play instruments – there are three cases (violins?) and a music rack standing by. On the sofas plastic dinosaurs are running here and there. There's a trampoline in the middle of the livingroom floor. Old furniture, lace curtains, crackling paint surfaces and colourful rugs. On the wall a stuffed head of a moose; on the next wall a moose-head made of felt that maybe someone made in school. It is not different here. We talk about borders. Dinosaurs and computers, trampolines and pelargonias. All familiar, all north and all south. We have come to look for differences, to map borders. Are we the ones drawing the lines?*  
- Pauliina's fieldnotes

What if we were not mapping out differences and similarities? Not drawing a two-column spreadsheet where on the left there is “same” and on the right the “different”. Could we try to find out something in between? Maybe this ‘in between’ could be the process of asking and telling stories – the co-production of stories. Maybe the ‘in between’ exists in the encounter between the researcher and the participant – in the space-time opening of a research project (i.e. Clandinin & Huber 2002). For without the project, there would not have been any such encounters. What if we were not looking for similarities and differences but focused on what happens ‘in between’ – when research opens up a space for an encounter.

In an inquiry based on understanding the context of the participants' lives is of central importance. Participants' lives are taken as holistic bundles of them as persons in their environment, culture, language and history – all the while remembering that the researcher also carries a life-world of her own. The process of inquiry where two people, researcher and participant, meet is thus not only an encounter of two separate, holistic life-worlds but as a process, a connecting and situating factor. (Perttula 1995, Rauhala 1989.) Everything that the researcher is and that she does, affects the inquiry and the results of it in some way (Lehtovaara 1993). In other words, a researcher aiming for understanding is a crucial part of the inquiry herself and thus she is always studying herself as well as her participants (also Conle 2000).

What is enchanting is that in a narrative inquiry the stories are produced together. Stories are always told to someone, for some purpose and in some context. The place in which we conduct our interviews – co-produce the stories – is not insignificant. Imagining places and environments, birthplaces, homes no longer existing, times without a road – or where a road or a river used to run – stories of living in dorms, being away from home, growing up with other adults and children than your relatives, playgrounds, natural environments where you could wander freely. All of this relating and imagining, the understanding – or misunderstanding – that follows, happens between the researcher and the participant, in the context of the interview in which it all unfolds. When the interview is carried out at the participant's home, there are mementos, furniture and pictures here and there to both guide the teller and the listener in their path for understanding.

Meandering stories told in natural, lived surroundings. That is what we expect and that is what we hear. But can we hear the voices we are not expecting? Not everyone wants to be interviewed at their home. And not everyone tells vivid stories where the life-world of culture, history, language, place and identity are present. What if someone seems to tell us very little? Do we hear the silences? What if there is nothing for us to relate to? Or what if they clearly tell us just the things they expect we want to hear? What if they tell us something else than we have asked for, in some other way than we asked? How can we not misunderstand them? This is when the Us-discourse of researchers and participants turns into Us - Them -discourse.



There are different stances of epistemological thinking amongst the researchers in our group. We are only just coming to ponder the ontological questions in our research.

Assuming a possibility of misunderstanding is assuming there is a right way to understand – that there is an objective reality. Ontologically and epistemologically this kind of thinking sets us as realists – albeit critical ones. As much as we think that stories are constructed, re-constructed and changing all the time, we do assume there to be a reality that the stories are rooted in (see for example Conle 2001). In this sense we definitely are realists. However, we are not interested in finding a truth behind the stories or sorting the stories into more true and less true statements. We are interested in the fact that the teller does tell a certain story, in a certain way, to certain people, in a certain context. The story is a description of a reality in a certain context and as such, it is true. In our inquiry the relationship to truth is, so to speak, a nonfoundational one, in comparison with positivism's relation to truth as foundational and constructivism's as anti-foundational (Denzin & Lincoln 2003).

The possibility and concern of misunderstanding is a real one, but in our view a nonfoundational one. By this we mean that we follow the Gadamerian tradition of hermeneutics, in which understanding is not just trying to understand the original view objectively, but also re-creating something new, The new which is created requires the effort of both parties. This is why we call our informants participants! The understanding that we aim for does not go straight back to the factual reality from which the participant and her story come from. This is yet again a space 'in between'. Somewhere between reality and relativity there is a space of creativity, an intermediate space of playing and interacting with the world (i.e. Winnicott 1971; or Bauman 1993, 169-174 "togetherness as playground"), safely rooted in the assumption of reality but letting go of the need to reach such a reality.

## **Tailpiece**

A lot has been written on ethical issues within narrative inquiry. To sum it all up, it is not possible to create a collection of definite rules and guidelines for research that has to do with telling about other people's lives. (Josselson 2007, 538.) The issues around ethics in narrative research are so complex that simple, categorical rules don't apply (Estola 2006; Josselson 2007, 538). What we can do, however, is to harbour and develop a kind of ethical attitude; that is, as researchers we can constantly think about ethical issues at hand and about how to best protect and respect the participants – all the while maintaining a high level of scientific standards in our research. (Josselson 2007, 538). Researcher's ability to be empathetic, non-judgemental, caring, patient and emotionally responsive are implicit but crucial factors in the formation of the relationship between her and her participants. No oral or written agreement or information will guarantee trust. These might, in fact, lead to exactly the opposite (see Andrews 2007)

Having said all of this, maybe we also need to be caring towards ourselves. Donald W. Winnicott (1971) speaks consolingly about mothers not having to be perfect but just 'good enough'. When we are good enough researchers, we do our work with the best of intentions and the best of our abilities but with a humble and thus ethical attitude of always assuming there is something we have forgotten or not thought about (see Biesta 2006). Even the strictest of methodological traditions cannot protect us from mistakes.

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