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Having a Laugh and Negotiating the Situation: The Significance of Humor During Fieldwork Among International Teenagers

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Abstract

This article elaborates on the significance of humor and playful interactions in an ethnographic research project among 14- and 15-year-old teenagers in an international middle school in Finland. First, it discusses the role of humor among students and their teachers in the school. Second, the article elaborates on the role humor played when an adult ethnographer was negotiating her role and actions with these teenagers; humor and playful interactions provided useful tools with which to negotiate the researcher's role and made the project a fun and enjoyable experience for the researcher and participants alike. The article employs the concept of reality play when analyzing everyday interactions in a school context, and it argues both that the use of humor can contribute to forming meaningful and ethically sound relationships between researcher and participants and that elaborations on research and ethics should pay more attention to the significance of humor and playfulness as essential parts of human life.

Keywords

ethnography, school, youth, humor, joking, Finland, researcher role, ethics

> She must be a pretty bad student as she is in the middle school at her age. (Martin,[1] 15 years)

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The above comment is from the field notes I wrote while conducting ethnographic fieldwork among 14- and 15-year-old teenagers in a Finnish international school. Initially, as a middle-aged academic, I had been somewhat terrified of interacting with teenagers and of gaining access to their everyday lives but, in the end, the fieldwork turned out to be not only extremely interesting but also a lot of fun.

Although schools are formal institutions with rigid timetables and curriculums, many informal and playful interactions happen during the school day. This informal sphere was central for me since I was not studying schooling per se but aiming to investigate teenagers' everyday lives, their experiences of international mobility, and their views on belonging. During the fieldwork, I quickly realized that humor was very important in their everyday relations and, eventually, I learned to participate in the humorous and playful interactions myself.

In this article, I elaborate on the role of humor in both the teenagers' everyday lives in school and my interactions with them during the ethnographic fieldwork. In what follows, I first outline my theoretical framework, namely certain anthropological and sociological approaches to humor and joking. I then describe my research setting and the methodologies used. In the empirical section, I first describe the role of humor in interactions between students and teachers and among students themselves. I argue that school can be seen as a context of "forced togetherness" (Wise 2016), where humor is used to make the best of a situation one is obliged to be in. Consequently, I describe and analyze the role of humor in navigating my role as an ethnographer. I discuss how the teenagers and I used humor as a tool to negotiate my somewhat awkward role as a highly educated adult among teenagers. I employ the concept of reality play to analyze the use of humor during the fieldwork. I argue that humor was not only a useful tool with which to navigate the field situation but that it also made the fieldwork experience more meaningful and fun. Above all, the use of humor contributed to the forming of ethically sound relationships between me and the teenagers.

Anthropological and Sociological Takes on Humor

Joking and humor are essential elements of human interaction, and humor can illustrate many important aspects of the human condition. There is an increasing amount of sociological and anthropological literature on the theme which shows that humor is a much more serious issue than merely a question of laughter and fun.

First of all, joking always has a collective nature, that is, humor is social and requires interaction and response (Fine 1984, 89; Trnka 2018, 180).

Sociologist Gary Alan Fine has demonstrated this by arguing that jokes can be interpreted as questions that need confirmation from the listeners (Fine 1984, 89). In other words, reciprocity is an essential part of humor (Wise 2016, 485). Moreover, humor is frequently used to strengthen group cohesion and bonds. Jokes seldom work with strangers in random situations; humor usually requires a relatively stable situation so that there is enough mutually shared understanding of what is, and is not, funny (Giuffrè 2015, 233; Johnson 1978, 314).

The shared understanding of humor is related to collective identities (Trnka 2018, 184). Several scholars have argued that those who laugh together form a kind of communitas in opposition to outsiders (Carty and Musharbash 2008; Trnka 2018, 183). In fact, humor is frequently used as a tool in boundary work, whereby jokes become "effective tools of social incorporation and discrimination" (Trnka 2018, 183–4), establishing insiders—those who share the joke—and outsiders—those who do not (e.g. Wise 2016, 485). Moreover, laughing "with" certain people often also "entails laughing 'at' others" (Carty and Musharbash 2008, 214; de Vienne 2012, 164).

A joke becomes a joke in a particular place and time (Haugerud, Mahoney, and Ference 2012; Trnka 2018, 184). Moreover, joking usually requires immediate responses (Carty and Musharbash 2008, 214). Sometimes, joking is described with the frustrating "you-had-to-be-there syndrome," referring to the fact that a joke often loses its meaning when told afterward (Carty and Musharbash 2008, 18; see also Oring 2008, 199). Moreover, in addition to being there, quite often "you had to have been someplace else earlier to get the joke" (Trnka 2018, 184), that is, it is not only the current context but also the past context that matters. This, in turn, shows again the collective nature of humor; either you share certain knowledge, experiences, and meanings, or you are an outsider (Trnka 2018, 184).

In addition to humor being used as a boundary-making tool, it often plays a significant role within a community or group. Humor is not only used to strengthen bonds but is also often used to negotiate differences, misunderstandings, and ambiguities within a group (Giuffrè 2015, 234; Wise 2016, 481). Such uses of humor aim to ease tensions and negotiate power hierarchies (Lund 2015, 290; Rehak 2018, 8). A concept closely related to this approach is Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's famous concept of a "joking relation," which he defines as "a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 195). Joking relations are usually contrasted with avoidance relations which require a respectful distance; in joking relations, the distance is overcome via

a humorous interaction. In other words, behaviors that would usually be deemed inappropriate in particular hierarchical relationships become accepted and appropriate in a joking relationship (Garde 2008, 237). The purpose of such practices is to manage, clarify, and stabilize hierarchical relationships (de Vienne 2012, 164; Lund 2015, 285, 297; Radcliffe-Brown 1940). They also ease everyday interactions between people who are in structurally unequal situations.

In addition to its having functional roles within groups or communities, humor has also been analyzed in terms of its contextual meanings. Sociologist Christie (2011) has published an extensive analysis of jokes in different societal contexts. He is interested in knowing why a particular joke circulates in a particular society at a particular time (Davies 2011, 5). He explains jokes in terms of certain social/political situations and historical events and patterns (Davies 2011, 253), that is, in addition to the obvious facts that human beings like to be amused (Davies 2011, 12) and that jokes create and maintain sociability (Davies 2011, 267), the wider societal, temporal, and structural contexts are significant and, by paying attention to these contexts, studying humor can provide a lens through which to study various societal themes and phenomena.

Joking and humor are, however, not only related to group cohesion. The use of humor, and irony in particular, can give individuals agency and may help them to recognize this agency and that of others. Irony is employed especially in controversial situations (Marcus 2001), where it is used to negotiate power and existing (oppressive) structures (Juntunen and Laakkonen 2019). In fact, sociologist Anton C. Zijderveld was already writing decades ago about joking as a tool with which to channel conflicts and relieve tensions in both society and fixed relations (Zijderveld 1968, 302–5). He saw joking and laughing as expressions of human freedom and as potential tools for critiquing and challenging the establishment (Zijderveld 1968, 310–1). Joking can thus play a significant role on a societal level and may hold the potential for social change.

At the same time, on the everyday level, jokes offer “a short break away from the everyday inhibitions and restrictions that bind the ways we speak” (Davies 2011, 3). According to Davies, telling jokes “involves the conscious transgressing of social conventions about what may and may not be said” (Davies 2011, 268), and a key characteristic of joking is the aspect of unexpectedness and playfulness (Davies 2011, 3).

Sociologist Michael (1984) has used the concept of reality play to analyze humor. This sees joking as a tool for playing with reality to achieve a temporary liberation from the burden of “reality work,” which he considers “any instance of normatively-oriented social interaction” (Flaherty 1984, 75).

Reality play thus refers to activities in social interaction that toy with cultural or interpersonal expectations. It makes interactions more pleasurable and fun without challenging them. In short, acts of reality play "produce the phenomenon we call humor, and the emotion we know as amusement" (Flaherty 1984, 75). Such reality play is an essential aspect of human life.

Humor and Ethnographic Fieldwork

The anthropological literature discusses humor not only within different cultural contexts but also with regard to researchers' ethnographic fieldwork experiences, that is, in light of methodological reflections. Joking and humor are central to many fieldwork contexts. Anthropologist Martina Giuffrè argues that an understanding of local jokes implies that the researcher has become an insider (Giuffrè 2015, 234); being able to understand local humor is often taken as a signpost of having acquired insider knowledge, without which one can hardly claim to have become an insider (Giuffrè 2015, 219). Giuffrè describes how, during her fieldwork in Cape Verde, her ability to understand ironic interactions was tested on several occasions and that "the success of these tests depended on her responses." She argues that, during her fieldwork, laughing together became a shared social practice and "an act of complicity and reciprocity" (Giuffrè 2015, 220–9).

The significance of humor during fieldwork is not, however, only a matter of being able to understand local jokes. Many anthropologists have revealed occasions on which they have felt included in the communities they study when they have been able to successfully tell jokes themselves and people have laughed with them, instead of at them (Carty and Musharbash 2008, 209). Fieldwork reflections often show that humor is a means of forming and maintaining bonds (Wise 2016, 489) between ethnographers and interlocutors. One needs, however, a "license" to joke, and earning such a license takes time. Sociologist Amanda Wise defines a license to joke as a mutual agreement that what is said is play and no offense should be taken (Wise 2016, 491). I see a license to joke also in broader terms, as a license to be heard and to potentially be considered funny.

During ethnographic fieldwork, joking is not, however, merely a matter of being regarded as an insider or an outsider. Anthropologist Maarja Kaaristo has elaborated on how joking can play a central role in everyday relations during fieldwork. Just like in a community in general, in a fieldwork context, humor can be used as a tactic to deal with conflicting roles and power hierarchies (Kaaristo 2022, 747–48). This is often needed because the researcher tends to be an outsider who is often somewhat—or even significantly—different from the people they are studying. Research participants and

researchers can use joking as a strategy to both diminish and affirm researcher–participant hierarchies (Giuffrè 2015, 231–2; Kaaristo 2022, 743, 744): humor can express and highlight differences and hierarchies but it can also downplay or destabilize them (Giuffrè 2015, 218, 236; Kaaristo 2022, 756). Humor can also help the researcher and the participants to deal with uncomfortable or awkward situations, for example by making fun of the research project itself (see e.g., Juntunen and Laakkonen 2019), or it can help in "enhancing relationships and solidarity with other people" (Kaaristo 2022, 747). Yet, as Kaaristo points out, research situations are fluid and dynamic, and, consequently, negotiations about roles and hierarchies are ongoing (Kaaristo 2022, 756). A single joke does not solve any issues but humor can be used continuously to negotiate fieldwork situations.

Research Setting and Methodology

The labor migration of highly educated professionals, sometimes called career expatriates or transnational corporate elites (Amit, 2002; Fechter, 2007), is increasing in various parts of the world. Finland, among many countries, welcomes this phenomenon, since international experts offer skills that are necessary in the global competitive markets, and a foreign labor force is needed because the domestic population is aging. These experts are often accompanied by their spouses and children, yet not much attention has been paid to the children's experiences. In my current research project, I focus on such international children and teenagers in Finland.

This article is centered on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted among eighth graders (14- and 15-year-olds) in a municipal international school[2] in a Finnish town for 8 months in 2021–2022. My research methods included participant observation, interviews, and participatory visual projects. I took part in everyday classroom activities, school events, and excursions. I spent time with the pupils during breaks, at lunchtimes, and also on occasion after school. I also interviewed 15 teenagers (seven girls and eight boys) and gave some of them digital cameras, with the task of taking photos of important things in their everyday lives. Afterward, I talked about the photos with them.

I started the fieldwork after the mid-term break in October 2021 and stayed in the school until the end of the 2022 spring term. I was present at the site for between 2 and 5 days a week and participated in the everyday school life of a specific class. Sometimes, however, the students had lessons together with other classes—for example, music and home economics were taught in mixed groups—and I also participated in these. During the school day, I followed lessons quietly or, at times, took a more active role as a kind of teaching assistant. My participation was particularly active in Finnish as a second

language, music, and physical education (PE) lessons, the main reason for this was that there was more small group work. In addition, all three of these subjects involved many informal interactions, which provided me not only with interesting data but also with easier access to a meaningful role in relation to the students.

The interviews were transcribed and then organized and coded with Atlas.ti software. My field diaries were also thematically coded. The study was evaluated by the ethics committee of my home university, and research permits were obtained from both the school principal and the municipal school administration. Information sheets were sent out to all the pupils and consent forms were collected from parents whose children participated. The participants also gave me their own written and oral consent. I explained the research to them several times, and they asked me questions about it on a number of occasions.

The pupils in this study held various nationalities. Some had roots in European countries or other affluent industrialized states such as the United States, Canada, or Australia. Some came from Russia, India, China, or other Asian countries, or African or Latin American countries. Some of them had recently arrived in Finland—some even during my fieldwork—while others had been in the country for years. There were also many Finnish pupils in the school where I conducted my fieldwork; some of them had previously lived abroad, others had not.

Humor in the Everyday Life of the School

Humor With Teachers

Teacher: By the end of ninth grade, you will all have been in this school for. . .

Samuel: Too many years. (the class bursts into laughter) (Field diary, November 2021)

The above interaction took place during an English grammar lesson on tenses. During my very first weeks of fieldwork, I had already realized that humor was an integral part of teacher–student relations in the school. At times, students used humor to negotiate some form of liberation from the institution's formal structures and practices, and from the simple fact that they had no other viable option but to attend school.[3] It can be argued that although being in school is the pupils' reality work, they can try, through acts of reality play (Flaherty 1984), to make it fun on occasion.

Compared with schools on a global scale, the ethos in Finnish schools is rather informal. Pupils call their teachers by their first names (and vice versa), and the pedagogical approach is participatory and interactive. The teachers are highly educated professionals, yet they usually do not perform an authoritarian role but interact with the pupils in a relatively informal manner, which often includes the use of humor:

Teacher: What does a welfare state mean?
Chris: You get like free health care.
Teacher: . . .and the education that you *enjoy* every day.
Chris: *Only enjoy*! (Field diary, November 2021)

This type of playful interaction emerged from ad hoc everyday situations and solicited a sense of irony and immediate responses from both students and teachers. In fact, at times it seemed to me that being a teacher in a middle school is similar to being an improvisational stand-up comedian.

Not all teachers utilized humor in their teaching, and there was variation in how it was used; nevertheless, it was an integral part of many lessons. Although from the students' perspective such playfulness simply made school days more fun (or more bearable), from many teachers' perspectives the playfulness was also a question of positive pedagogy; teachers were not jeopardizing their pedagogical goals but rather engaging in humorous interactions with students to promote a relaxed learning environment.

This type of pedagogic is typical in the North European context. A similar pedagogical approach has been described by sociologist Anna Lund, who has written about joking between students and teachers in a Swedish secondary school for dropouts. She vividly describes how joking can become "a positive resource, rather than a negative one" (Lund 2015, 301). She uses the concept of "close distance" (Lund 2015, 304), referring to the process whereby teachers use joking as a tool to gain the students' trust and respect. She argues that when the social disjunctions and boundaries between students and teachers are negotiated via humor (Lund 2015, 291), humor can end up being a successful pedagogical tool, encouraging students to achieve greater success in school.

In my fieldwork school, not only did teachers make humorous comments but it was socially legitimate for pupils to joke with teachers as well. This, in turn, required quick responses on the part of teachers. In addition, playful relations entailed not only joking in words but also playful acts:

> Lucas has drawn a 100 dollar note on a piece of paper. When the lesson starts, he gives it to the teacher and mentions it is a bribe to get a better grade. The

> teacher sticks it to the board so that everyone sees how they could improve their grades. (Field diary, February 2022)

For this interaction to be understood as play, all the participants had to share the understanding that pupils do not and cannot bribe teachers in Finnish schools. This is a good example of how during the course of everyday life in the school, teachers and students had a mutual understanding of what was an accepted and funny joke. Such an understanding is strikingly different from Paul Willis's (1977) definition of joking in his classical work, that is, a counter-school cultural practice through which working-class boys try to negotiate freedom from schoolwork and middle-class values. The anecdote above can also be analyzed using the concept of reality play. Teachers giving students grades is an essential aspect of schoolwork and is something that obviously affects relations between students and their teachers. At the same time, grading is not explicitly visible in most everyday interactions during the school day and here Lucas gets involved in a skillful act of reality play when he makes the grading blatantly visible with his fake dollar note. The teacher, in turn, also participates in this reality play, thus rendering the start of a mundane lesson amusing for everyone in the classroom.

In my view, the use of humor—or reality play—in the school context can be understood as a tool to mediate smooth everyday actions. Wise's concept of "living together in forced togetherness" describes this situation well. She applies the concept to the workplace, where one cannot choose one's colleagues (Wise 2016, 482–4), but the same applies to the school context; students cannot choose their teachers or classmates. However, they, and their teachers, can try to make the situation work as well as possible, and joking and playfulness provide excellent tools for this.

Humor Among Pupils

In addition to humor being important in the teacher–pupil relationship, it was also central to peer relations among students. During the 15-minute breaks between lessons, students hung out in the corridors, often playing games on their phones but also chatting and joking with each other. In addition, lunchtimes were important occasions for informal interactions between pupils. All pupils in Finnish schools get a free warm lunch every day, and during the school day lunch breaks are the longest stretch of time that students have for interacting freely with their peers. In my fieldwork school, students had to have lunch at the same tables as their classmates and there was a lot of laughter and play involved. Often, a quiet moment of eating escalated into a playful game of fooling around:

> Chris tries to take meatballs from Tina's plate. She is trying to prevent him but, in the end, he succeeds in snatching a meatball. Consequently, Javier and Matthew also take a meatball from her. Tina laughs, gets up and goes to get more meatballs from the counter. Samuel raises his voice: "You see, do not vote for the Democrats, they tax you and take all your meatballs and give them to the immigrants!" (Field diary, November 2021)

> Tina and Javier start switching glasses on their trays. Kieran points out that they seem to have an ongoing glass custody battle. When the glass switching continues, Kieran moves to sit next to me. He claims to be a refugee who comes to the border of the two tables. I joke with him about him being a refugee, me interviewing him and not letting him into the country and making him wait for a long time. (Field diary, December 2021)

Jokes about immigrants and foreigners were common among the pupils with whom I hung out. Although such jokes were often used to constitute boundaries, it was not a question of us versus them. As all these pupils could be defined in some way as immigrants or foreigners themselves, such jokes could actually be seen as tools for negotiating their own identities and place in Finnish society. The international school also seemed to provide a "safe" environment in which to negotiate national or ethnic differences with the use of humor. When a pupil was defined as a "foreigner" they had a license to joke about the topic, and the jokes could be seen as a (successful) strategy to gain agency in this particular societal situation, where many of the teenagers were structurally defined as the "other" (see also Juntunen and Laakkonen 2019):

> I stand in the hallway during the break. Javier and Carlo keep "hitting" each other. When they realise that I am watching them, Javier tells me: "It's a South American ritual for making rain." (both of them have South American roots) (Field diary, March 2022)

> In the maths book, there is an assignment where one has to calculate the area to be fenced. Anton is not too keen on maths and he bursts out: "She lives in Canada, there is no need for fences or locking up the doors there." (Field diary, November 2021)

As the extracts above show, stereotypes connected with nationalities or geographical origins were often commented on humorously among the students, and this can be seen as an empowering and playful act of agency. At the same time, there was zero tolerance for racism. Navigating the balance between joking and racism, however, required constant negotiation, and this was at

times explicitly discussed among the students when they felt someone may have crossed the line. Wise has used the concept of a joking frame to analyze racial joking. She defines it as a "set of agreed rules . . . which govern jocular interaction." In other words, for "behaviour to be recognised as joking, individuals must receive a 'license to joke' from the persons to whom their joking activity is directed" (Wise 2016, 487). In her work, Wise uses the joking frame to explain why, sometimes, seemingly racist jokes are not experienced as offensive but rather "as an expression of friendship" (Wise 2016, 486). Gaining a license to joke and negotiating a joking frame requires time, but since these students spent a number of hours a day together in school, they had plenty of time to negotiate joking frames with each other. The frames were, however, fluid and constantly re-negotiated, especially those related to ethnicities and nationalities, and there was a fine line across which a joke became offensive.

Although the pupils usually claimed not to have encountered racism themselves, the theme was present in their interactions on an almost daily basis. Racism was in fact a sort of class joke. Students made remarks almost every day about someone or something being racist, but in a highly playful manner; for example, a yellow pen or red bag could be called racist because of its color. In other words, the students used racism as a code word for any differences. They explained this to be a strategy whereby calling everything racist results in racism losing its meaning, and although the pupils hardly ever seemed to discuss racism in serious terms, humor seemed to be a subtle way of holding such a discussion.

Occasional jokes relating to gender were also clearly made within an ironic joking frame, in which it was clear to everyone that the statements were not to be taken seriously:

> Boys have brains and girls have no brains. (Tony, 14 years)

Interestingly, the ironic gendered joking frame seemed much more stable than the ethnic/national one. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that joking was a clearly gendered activity in the class where I conducted my fieldwork. The students who made the most public jokes were all boys. This does not, however, mean that girls did not tell jokes but that their jokes were often targeted at a friend or two rather than the whole class. Moreover, boys in general took up more space (both physically and verbally) within the class. Yet, boys and girls interacted with each other a lot, and the class often laughed together.

Although gender differences were not a common topic for jokes and were actually seldom even mentioned within the class, differences from other classes at the same grade level were frequently joked about:

> We are studying, we are like the intellectuals, they are the retarded ones. (Samuel, 14 years)

This type of boundary-making through humor was clearly visible in the school on a daily basis. In the extract above, a boundary is constructed between "our" and "their" class in the same school. At other times, humorous comparisons were made with the (imagined) "other teenagers" beyond the international school. However, when the pupils engaged in this type of identity talk, they did not define themselves as "foreigners" or "immigrants" but as students in a particular class within this particular school. The "other" in contrast to whom they defined themselves was the "ordinary" teenager going to a Finnish-speaking school and being defined, at times, as ridiculous and inferior, as the comment below suggests:

> "I'm so cool, aren't I?" "No, you never were." (Tony)

Similarly, Lucas made the following comment when I asked him to elaborate on "who are you?" and he ended up defining who he was not:

> Jonnes[4] drink energy drinks but Red Bull doesn't give you wings, it gives you cardiac arrest. (Lucas. 14 years)

Interactions among the students often had a playful manner—that is, they constantly engaged in reality play—but this did not mean that they were merely silly. Instead, many of their jokes contained deeper meanings, and on several occasions, during my fieldwork, I felt like I was talking not to children but to intelligent adults, as they made such thoughtful comments on a variety of themes and were well informed about various debates going on in Finnish society and globally. Yet, the prevalent ethos for discussing such themes among themselves was playfulness.

On the whole, humor—or reality play—was strikingly visible in the everyday life of the school, in the interactions between teachers and students, and among the students themselves. Humor helped to define "us," to strengthen collective ties and get through the days. Although school days can often feel rather heavy and monotonous, at times during my fieldwork I felt like I had entered an ongoing stand-up comedy scene. The question then was what my role in the comedy scene was; or, rather, what my role in the class was, and whether humor had a role to play in it.

An Adult Among Teenagers

> Kill Mari. She is the evil in the field. Get rid of the adult. Get rid of the university professor. (Tony)

It is obvious that being middle-aged, having a PhD, and working in a university made me very different from the 14- and 15-year-olds with whom I was conducting the fieldwork. Humor was a way to negotiate this discrepancy, and as my fieldwork progressed and I realized how central humor was to the everyday life of the school, I started to use humor with the students myself, and they often made jokes about me. In other words, both the students and I were involved in frequent acts of reality play when negotiating my presence in the school and my involvement in the mundane workings of the school day.

Above all, I actively contributed to co-creating with students a joking frame in which humorous comments about me were allowed. A pupil shouted the above comment to his classmates during a game in a PE lesson. With this remark, he clearly defined me as different from the other players, the students. His playful comment, however, reveals a close and accepting relationship between me and the students; he would probably not have made such a comment about a random adult visitor as it would have sounded rude, but it was safe to say it about me.

During the fieldwork, I ended up actively co-constructing joking relations with the students; such relations did not structurally pre-exist. These joking relations proved to be useful tools in negotiating the situation; the blatant differences between me and the students could not be ignored and had to be negotiated for us to engage in meaningful interactions on an equal basis, which was my goal both as an anthropologist and a fellow human.

My age was a tangible difference between me and the students, and we joked about it on several occasions. One student actually occasionally referred to me as the old person, causing the homeroom teacher and other students to protest at his impoliteness. I often joked about my age myself as well. For example, during partner dancing in a PE lesson, I pointed out to some of the boys that they got a slightly older partner with me but they responded that I appeared young or that they did not want to discriminate.

In addition to my age, my educational background was a topic that both I and the students joked about regularly:

> You need a university education to understand that it's impossible to write the title in that way. (Carlo,15 years)

Carlo made the above comment during a lesson in which the students were drawing a poster and I was chatting with them while observing their work. Moreover, on several occasions, the students commented jokingly on how very smart I was since I had a PhD, although on other occasions I appeared far from smart when they were, for example, correcting my English or trying

to explain to me about video games or YouTube videos, of which I had no understanding at all.

My Finnish nationality was also a source of humor:

> We have cross-country skiing during the PE lesson. I am with the beginners and the teacher tells a student to look at my movements. He bursts out: "Of course she knows how to ski, she is Finnish. I'm Mexican, I shouldn't not be skiing but playing football and going to the beach." (Field diary, February 2022)

> During Monopoly, Sunny loses all her money and has to take out a mortgage.
>
> Helen: "Mari, you never paid a bill late?"
>
> Javier: "They don't do that in Finland. You can't say here that you will pay it the next month." (Field diary, June 2022)

Joking about my age, education, and nationality helped us to downplay the obvious differences between the teenagers and me. This, in turn, was necessary so that I could interact with them on a more equal basis. If they had felt intimidated by me, I would not have been able to construct trusting and meaningful relationships with them. Such relationships were crucial not only for me to gain knowledge for my research but also, above all, for the research process to be meaningful and enjoyable for the participants. In other words, I see this, principally, as an ethical stance. Ethnographers are not "collecting data" but co-creating knowledge together with their research participants. This necessarily calls for meaningful and reciprocal relations, active engagement, and mutual trust.

Attaining mutual understanding, trust, and playful interactions was the result of a long process. Yet, I did eventually succeed in being not only accepted by the teenagers but appreciated by them:

> Every class should have like a Mari. Generally useful helper . . .We could make like an acronym out of Mari: MAgnificent—Responsible—Individual. (Field diary, May 2022)

This is how the class described me at the end of my fieldwork when we were discussing my role and presence during the previous months.

Moreover, in spite of all the playfulness and joking, the students behaved toward me in strikingly polite ways, which indicates that even when I managed to get socially close to them they never forgot that I was much older than them. Interestingly, many of the teenagers I got to know during my fieldwork had previously lived in places where respect for their elders is required of

young people and they often mentioned this themselves in their constant negotiations regarding boundaries between themselves and "ordinary" Finnish teenagers whom they believed did not respect adults. On the whole, in their interactions with me, there was a constant interplay between politeness and respect and playfulness and informal joking; a very similar situation to how joking relations are classically defined.

It is important to note that during my fieldwork, I interacted more with boys than girls. This was not my initial intention but it ended up happening in practice. I believe the main reason for this is that teenage boys tend to hang out in groups, whereas girls often socialize with one or two close friends and it is socially easier for an adult researcher to get involved with a group than a pair. Looking back on my fieldwork experience, it seems to me that while the girls tolerated my presence, many of the boys interacted with me much more actively and playfully. Moreover, some of the boys were bold enough to use me for their benefit while none of the girls asked me for such favors. These favors included inviting me to help them with their bands during music lessons and using me as their walking dictionary during Finnish as a second language lesson. All this took place in a very playful manner but it was nevertheless clear that my presence and skills were useful to some students at times.

Another reason for my ending up spending more time with boys than girls is perhaps the fact that, in this particular class, the boys were louder and took up more public space. Consequently, there were more opportunities for reciprocal interactions with them. It is, however, worth noting that both girls and boys volunteered to be interviewed by me, that is, both boys and girls were willing to participate in the research.

As I outlined earlier in this article, the use of humor requires skill, immediate responses, and shared meanings and, in a fieldwork context, the researcher often becomes painfully aware of this. Although over time I created mutual joking frames with the students, these were fluid and required constant re-negotiation; sometimes my jokes worked, but at other times they did not.

Although I quite quickly earned a license to joke, the students did not always share with me the same joking frame. As described above, jokes relating to my education, age, and nationality worked quite well but, for example, when I tried to jokingly claim to be the "naive blonde woman," the teenagers did not get the joke at all—it was impossible for someone with my education to claim to be naive or stupid. In addition, jokes about blondes are probably old-fashioned, or at least not shared among international teenagers.

Similarly, when on a few occasions, I tried to take the blame for pranks that students had performed on each other, nobody believed me or found it

funny. The clear understanding was that “the university professor” (or “the old person”) could not perform pranks on students, and joking about this was not funny either. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, jokes often have an aspect of immediacy. At times, I simply had to admit to myself that I was too slow to keep up with the young people’s jokes.

Although my age and educational background were often commented upon and were thus clearly significant in the students’ process of defining who I was, my gender received hardly any public attention. The only occasions on which it was clearly visible were during PE lessons when I went into the girls’ changing room. This does not, however, mean that my gender would have been insignificant—most likely it was not—but there were no public comments about it and no acts of playfulness in that regard.

Although humor and playfulness were important aspects of everyday life in the school, it took time and mutual effort to create joking frames between me and the teenagers. I entered the scene as an outsider and was not automatically included in the existing joking frames; our frames had to be mutually constructed over time. My failed jokes made me painfully aware of the fact that joking not only strengthens our feelings of belonging but also makes us vulnerable. An ethnographer always needs to improvise (Malkki 2007), and humor in particular requires an ability to do so: this can be greatly rewarding but it can also mean occasions of failure and consequent feelings of uncomfortability. This became tangible, for example, on occasions when my bad jokes, and consequently my attempts to interact, were ignored.

So far, I have described how my role and place in the field were negotiated in terms of my characteristics and background. In addition to this, a key challenge during the fieldwork was negotiating my researcher role.

A Suspicious Spy? Making Sense of the Researcher’s Role

During the fieldwork, I obviously explained the research to the pupils on several occasions and gave them information sheets and opportunities to ask questions about the study. Such formalities do not, however, necessarily result in participants fully understanding what is happening in practice, especially when the study includes long-term participant observation.

The process of defining me as a researcher was often negotiated with humor. Playfulness in defining my role was particularly useful because I did not have a clear ready-made role when I entered the field context: I was neither teacher nor student—the two main roles available in the school context. As an adult, I could not be a student in the same way as my research participants but I was also not, and did not want to be, their teacher. Being an adult,

however, made me look like a teacher in the school context, and for quite a long time some of the students did call me a teacher, although they often remarked soon afterward that they had made a mistake. I was consciously trying to distance myself from the role of the teacher: I did not have the keys to the school, I did not discipline the students, I ate with them (unlike teachers who only supervised their conduct in the cafeteria), and I kept my coat and bag in the hallway instead of putting them into the teachers' lounge. Yet, to have a meaningful role during lessons, I sometimes ended up in the role of teaching assistant, especially in Finnish as a second language and music. Nevertheless, as the months went by the students stopped confusing me with the teachers, and eventually found it amusing when pupils from other classes mistakenly did so.

I made a conscious choice to keep handwritten notes during the school days. Not only did this help me to remember what had happened but it was also a visible reminder to the students (and teachers) of my researcher role (see Korpela 2022). My note-writing definitely did not go unnoticed. When the students had a fiction-writing assignment in their English lessons, one of them wrote a story in which several of his classmates appeared. I also appeared in it, as the extract below illustrates.

> She was writing notes more furiously than ever.

On another occasion, a student commented on my note-taking as follows:

> Mari single-handedly keeps the Finnish lumber industry alive. (Samuel)

At the same time, my note-taking also raised some concerns, and sometimes the students commented on my writing by asking me to note down something in particular or by telling me not to write something. Javier, in particular, was concerned about my notes and told me that he was worried I could hear his classmates' weird stories and that he did not want to be associated with them in my future publications. This was, however, said in a playful manner. Javier believed me when I said that nobody would be recognizable from my publications, he agreed to be interviewed by me and he continued to chat with me in spite of his suspicions about my research. Some other pupils, however, clearly kept their distance, indicating that they did not want to participate in the research even if they did not say so out loud. Throughout, I had to read a variety of situations and interactions with a delicate ear, but I believe that the long-term nature of the fieldwork gave me the skills to read subtle signs to be able to respect the students' wishes regarding their participation, regardless of their formal consent.

The role of a researcher who wrote notes was relatively clear. What the note-writing actually implied, however, was less clear, and humor was used to address this issue:

> You are a spy who was sent to collect DNA samples from a diverse class and create super-humans. (Javier, 15 years)

> We are just like some weirdoes . . . Before I was thinking oh, she is just being nice but now I am thinking, she wants us to tell her things that she can write it down in her paper . . .. basically, a university game. (Tony)

> You helped me in the Finnish and in the band, so I'd say it's a pretty good trade . . . for a spy. (Luis, 15 years)

It was common for the teenagers to refer to me as a spy. Such comments can be interpreted as clear acts of reality play. I was present in the students' mundane school realities and they had to put up with this. Not only was making playful comments about my presence a strategy with which to negotiate the situation; but it also provided instances of laughter during the "endless" school days. I usually responded to these spy references with an explanation of ethnographic research, but this obviously required me to a careful awareness so that I could see which students saw me as a spy from whom they wanted to keep their distance and which joked about the spying but in reality did not mind my presence. After all, many students found my research important and were pleased that someone was listening to them.

When, at the end of the fieldwork, I asked the class to reflect on my presence, some of them went as far as defining me as their friend:

J : Actually, honestly, at the beginning, I felt little bit uncomfortable that a teacher was eating with us in the cafeteria . . . But after a few weeks, we got to know each other better and you are more like a teacher and a friend. So we can sometimes share things.

R: We see you as a teacher and a friend, it's really good. (Julie 15 years and Rose 14 years)

During my fieldwork, I eventually became a sort of insider in the class. This was particularly tangible on two occasions when a new student joined the class; on these occasions, I was one of the group, someone who was known and who shared knowledge and memories with the group, unlike the newcomer. The same happened on a few occasions when there was an unknown substitute teacher. In such lessons, the students clearly defined me as one of them, an insider, against the substitute who did not know their names or ways.

Although my role and intentions were somewhat unclear to the students at the beginning, I managed to gain their trust over time. I also purposefully chose not to report to the teachers the occasional (relatively mild) misconduct that I saw among the students. This helped me to gain their trust. This is illustrated in the comment below, which was made in the girls' changing room before a PE lesson when the girls were giggling instead of quickly changing into their sports kit:

> You said that you are not like other adults, so you will not bust us. (Victoria, 14 years)

When an ethnographer enters teenagers' lifeworlds, there are bound to be negotiations of the situation and, ideally, the researcher and the participants co-create a meaningful social framework during the fieldwork. In my case, this meant negotiating the role of a different kind of adult, a sort of friend, and humor facilitated these negotiations. The negotiations and roles could have ended up looking very different in another context with other participants, yet the crucial point is that there is an important ethical stance here: an ethnographer should never be a spy but should always find a meaningful and mutually agreed role. Humor can help to negotiate these processes but it should never hide the ethical principle of reciprocal trust, openness, and honesty. Research ethics is not only about consent forms, ethics committees, and the safe processing of personal data. Research ethics is an ongoing process throughout an ethnographic study. Co-creating knowledge means that one has to accept unexpected situations, surprising interactions, and one's vulnerabilities as well as the rewarding joys of human interactions. Humor (i.e., reality play) is an integral part of being human and it should not be ignored in fieldwork or research ethics. In fact, it is striking how infrequently humor has been discussed in the abundance of texts on research ethics, considering how essential it is to human life, including situations where a researcher negotiates their role with interlocutors and vice versa.

Discussion

During my ethnographic fieldwork in an international middle school, I learned that humor was an important aspect of everyday interactions among the teenagers. It was used to create and maintain collective bonds as well as to negotiate differences and boundaries. At the same time, I am aware that not all humor has a functional role; very often people, including students in a middle school, joke and laugh simply because it is fun and makes everyday

life enjoyable. Reality play (Flaherty 1984) is an essential part of people's everyday lives.

Since humor was frequently used in the school where I conducted fieldwork, it was an easily available tool for me when negotiating my role with the teenagers. During my fieldwork, the use of humor was not a pre-planned strategy but something that evolved in everyday interactions. In an attempt to downplay hierarchies, I also actively contributed to creating joking relations in which laughing at me was allowed. These processes were related to the negotiations not only of my role but of the forced togetherness that the class had to deal with in school. The way in which I found a meaningful role as an ethnographer in a middle school was obviously particular to the Finnish context. The existence and significance of reciprocal humor and reality play can be very different in other school contexts, yet humor—and reality play—is without doubt common in schools and among teenagers elsewhere too, in one way or another.

Nevertheless, in addition to the joys and benefits it can provide, joking involves a great deal of vulnerability: there is always the risk of people not finding a joke funny, which makes the person making it look awkward and feel uncomfortable. Therefore, ethnographic fieldwork requires not only time but also personal stamina to handle unpleasant situations when the researcher feels that they have failed in their interactions.

Creating shared joking frameworks, and frameworks of interaction in general, takes time. This is why I am an advocate of long-term fieldwork; creating meaningful relationships is a long-term process. Moreover, "joking frames and humorous orientations are by no means static" but constantly renegotiated between diverse actors (Wise 2016, 496), and this applies also to fieldwork contexts; it is a question not only of gaining access but also of maintaining and re-creating joking frames and meaningful (serious and playful) interactions on a daily basis. Yet, only with long-term commitment and interactions can an ethnographer gain the aim for insightful knowledge. It is, however, important to note that such an instrumental approach to the advantages of long-term fieldwork is actually secondary. The most important aspect of the fieldwork process is making it meaningful and even enjoyable for the participants. The researcher should aim to create close relationships not to gain knowledge but because this is an ethically sound way to interact with people as an ethnographer.

During my fieldwork with teenagers, the use of humor contributed to reciprocal relationships; we had not only meaningful but also fun interactions. Humor and reality play do not wipe away the differences between ethnographers and interlocutors but help to negotiate them: I did not cease to be a highly educated adult but I nevertheless became an accepted—albeit

somewhat different—member of the community, and we co-constructed meaningful reciprocal relations. In the end, fieldwork with teenagers in an international school turned out to be a really fun experience, and I laughed a lot more than I usually laugh at work.

The majority of reflexive elaborations on ethnographic fieldwork tend to focus on problems and their solutions. Seldom do we get to read about the fun and enjoyable aspects of fieldwork, as if research would not be taken seriously if it was fun. It is, however, never a bad idea to have some laughs and there should be scope for humor even in research because it is an essential part of life. Moreover, joking and humor should not always be analyzed in functional terms; joking and playfulness—reality play—in social interactions also make life, and research, fun.

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Notes

1. The research participants' names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. Almost all international schools in Finland are state-funded and municipal, with no tuition fees and with teaching delivered in English but following the Finnish national curriculum.
3. Homeschooling is allowed in Finland, but as it requires a great deal of time and effort on the part of families it is not a feasible option for most children and teenagers.
4. Jonne is a boy's name and also a pejorative term in Finnish. It is used to refer to teenage boys who behave in childish ways and are interested in scooters and energy drinks rather than studying.

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