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Is Ethnography Only for Early Career Researchers?

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Introduction

A common characteristic of ethnographic research is that it is often conducted by early career researchers or PhD candidates. More established or senior researchers tend to move on to supervise younger people's fieldwork or switch to entirely different research approaches. There must be a variety of reasons for this, one of them being that ethnographic fieldwork is embodied work: the older you get, the more tiresome you might feel it is to negotiate social contacts to get to the "field," take notes, be constantly observant, and give up your personal routines in order to become included in the groups and communities you study. It might also feel strange to practice the mindset of "anthropological strangeness" if you, as a more mature researcher have already some experience and knowledge of the topics you study.

While there might be many reasons why ethnography is well suited to young researchers, I focus in this chapter on the age of the researcher and ponder how it shapes the mundane doing of ethnographic fieldwork. Rather than viewing age as an individualized asset of the researcher, I am more interested in looking at age in a methodologically tuned way and how the age of the researcher intersects with field relations and, at the end of the day, the understanding of the topic under study. My particular focus is on "old" age as it is more uncommon in ethnography than "young(ish) age" and thereby encourages a reflection on age-related matters. This chapter also explores the temporal nature of ethnography in a wider

sense. Time and temporal dimensions are always embedded in ethnography (as they are in all aspects of social life), yet the overwhelming frame is to emphasize “the ethnographic present” which often suppresses time (McLeod & Thomson, 2009; Atkinson, 2017). The “present” is regulated by a variety of academic traditions, methodological fashions, research ethics standards, and other similar issues of academia which the researcher of whatever age has to take a stand on and incorporate into research. Moreover, the ethnographic present is not free from temporal layers and their continuities and discontinuities which may shape fieldwork in a variety of ways of which the researcher may be more or less aware. Some external factors shaping fieldwork become visible for reflection when revisiting the same site (e.g., Boelen, 1992; Burawoy, 2003).

This chapter explores the age of the researcher through a research design of revisits. Between the revisits to the site, the conditions and customs for doing research change and so does the researcher. This happened in my research as I revisited my field sites, which in my case were reform schools for troublesome young people 10 years after my first study. In the first study, I was a PhD student of the age of a “big sister” in relation to the young residents; in the later study, this then changed to a position of an associate professor and the age of a “mother” to the young people. More than only reflecting past ethnographic work, I will be shifting between the lived and imagined fieldwork of the same research site as I play with the idea of doing it once more: as a person soon to retire. What would it be like to do an ethnography of the same reform schools for young people now? What would it be like to stay in the institutions for several months and talk with young people and staff in the ethnographer role as a retiring professor of social work? What impact would that have on ethnographic relations and understanding?

The Context: Institutions for Troublesome Young People

Human service institutions are typically differentiated by age—kindergartens versus adult education, care homes for the elderly, and adult versus youth prisons, among others. What

tends to typify ethnographers in this regard, regardless of the field, is adulthood. As adults, ethnographers often observe other adults in different settings. On some occasions, if care homes are studied, for example, adults may be defined as being “the elderly” but otherwise adulthood is shadowed by the other identities attached to the people in the field (e.g., inmates, patients, or care workers). When children are studied in kindergarten, school, or other similar contexts, adulthood is not shared but it is still taken for granted as a feature of the ethnographer: ethnographers are adults unless child or youth-led research designs are implemented (e.g., Delgado, 2006). According to Allison James (2011), as the researcher is not a child, there always exists a power differential between the child and the adult researcher, and this dilemma is handled in a variety of ways in research which aims to “understand” children; however, in the end, the inevitable differences between children and other ethnographic selves have to be accepted (James, 2011).

This is evident in the human service organizations presented in this chapter. They are Finnish residential child welfare institutions in which children and young people under the age of 18 are placed on the grounds laid out by the Child Welfare Act. The placement is made for the welfare and protection of the child. Nevertheless, it makes sense to translate the name of the institutions into English as “reform schools” as they are not ordinary child welfare institutions. During their long history, going back to the end of the nineteenth century, they have had a special standing among the variety of child welfare institutions as ones for “high-risk” troublesome—asocial—young people who need special measures of education, upbringing, and care (Bardy et al. 2001; Pekkarinen, 2017). Over time, they have established an image as last resort institutions; on the other hand, they have in recent years claimed to be institutions with special expertise in “high risk young people” (Pekkarinen, 2017). They are the only child welfare institutions governed by the state as other institutions are governed by municipalities or are outsourced by them to private care providers. Unlike other child welfare institutions, there is also specific legislation defining their role. There are currently five state-run reform schools, with approximately 150 children residing in them and 130 members of staff working with them. In 2022, the website providing information about the reform schools presents them under the headings “Reform schools—on a path towards

positive growth” and “All children and young people have the right to education, treatment and care,” described in more detail as follows:

The care, education and teaching provided at reform schools form a rehabilitative whole that emphasises factors protecting growth and mental health. The experiences young people and their families get of fairness and being heard are an important part of a successful care process in a reform school. As a premise, young people are strongly and equally included in the planning concerning their own lives. To safeguard the age-appropriate development of young people, reform schools employ specialists in care, education and teaching. The work carried out with families aims at helping the young people build workable relationships with their loved ones, and makes the placement a shared process that the whole family is involved in.

(Valtion kouluksodit, 2022)

Any study of reform schools is in one way or another informed by the long history and competing treatment philosophies about how best to work with troublesome young people. The description of the reform schools is rich in the vocabulary of rehabilitation, care, participation, mental health, and family relations which reflects their present emphasis on treatment. Interestingly, the wording avoids “high-risk youth” terminology such as petty crimes and drug abuse which previously characterized the public presentation of the institutions. At the beginning of the 1970s, for example, the reform schools were targeted by the radical criticism of the time as they, as “total institutions,” were seen as acting against the rights and liberty of residents, in similar fashion to the mental health hospitals and prisons of that time. Later, the testimonies of ex-residents have highlighted their experiences of tough discipline and even abuse (Hytönen et al., 2016). On the other hand, their treatment philosophies also record an interest in art-based and empowering therapies for young residents (Känkänen, 2013). What has remained unchanged is that the residents are children—or young people as they will be called in the chapter—up to 18 years of age.

Revisiting and Imagining Reform Schools

In methodological terms, revisiting can imply two different types of research: follow-up studies or the archiving and reanalysis of existing studies or data (McLeod & Thomson, 2009). Follow-up “revisiting” studies, as one type of longitudinal qualitative studies, include those

where the original researcher reviews a previously completed study through a different temporal and conceptual lens, or extends the original study with another way of research, or subsequently returns to a research site or follow up participants.

(McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 122)

Revisiting follow-up studies may provide insight into social processes at different points in time and capture the crisscrossing of the past, present, and future (McLeod & Thomson, 2009; p. 138). The different time periods provide the revisiting researcher an opportunity to compare them and analyze change. Changes do not, however, belong only to the past. McLeod and Thomson (2009) propose two temporal strategies for qualitative research on change: memory and imagination. Memory is about the past; imagination is about the future. For someone interested in ethnographic fieldwork and the impact of the ethnographer’s age on it, they provide a unique platform: the memorized fieldwork is about the younger “me” and the imagined future fieldwork is about the older “me.” Revisiting sites provides material for memories about what it was like to “be there”; imagination provides material for thinking about what it could be like to “be there.”

Both memory and imagination can be contested because of their subjectivity. Nevertheless, I will build the following sections on them in order to reflect upon the age of the ethnographer and its impact on field relations on the one hand, and the temporal contexts of ethnography on the other hand. I will look at three issues, all stereotypical for any ethnographic report, that being, roughly speaking, entering the field, the embodied fieldwork, and relations in the field. The focus on those typical themes is an acknowledgment of the

essence of ethnography as a method: one has to be “there” and “being there” requires access, observations, and taking notes among other similar tasks. In their revised textbook, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019, p. xii) state that while introducing “new approaches and innovations” to ethnography, the differences between past and current principles and practices are often exaggerated. Whatever new approaches to ethnography are introduced, one still has to be “there” to problematize everyday life at the chosen site. This continues to be a constant methodological challenge for ethnographic handicraft (e.g., Jacobsson & Gubrium, 2021), also evident in revisiting and imagining ethnographic work.

In what follows, memory is used for remembering what, for example, the relations in the field were like during my visits to the reform schools and imagination is used to draft an agenda for a return to the reform schools in the near future. In order to support my memory of the revisiting fieldwork periods, I have reread the reports written about those periods. Both reports (Pösö, 1993, 2004) include long chapters about fieldwork, following the idea that the reader of the reports really needs to know about the doings in the field in order to evaluate the quality of the research data and interpretations of it. I have also reread other texts that I wrote at the time. The texts are re-interpreted for this chapter as at the time of the first study in particular I did not think much of my age and its impact on the ethnographic relations although I was deeply aware of my different ways of being in the field during the two research periods. All memories are not, however, written as notes; instead, some memories “emerge” and become a part of the study when memorizing the past and present (Plummer, 2019) – I take some freedom to include them as well. When imagining the future fieldwork, I use my best knowledge of the present state of the reform schools, research ethics, and governance and troubled childhood as well as child welfare practices and play with the thought of what it would be like to enter the institutions as an ethnographer. It is a sort of “time travel” or just a reminder of the humanistic nature of ethnographic research in which there is not only the past and present but also the future (McLeod & Thomson, 2009).

Meeting Points: Researcher Biography and the Reform Schools

Between periods of my first and second episodes of fieldwork in the reform schools at the turn of the 1980–1990s and in the early twenty-first century, the number of reform schools in Finland had declined from ten to six, and the number of residents had declined accordingly, not to mention changes in treatment rationales and professional ethos. One of the schools of my first study did not exist anymore, demonstrating that even the institutions with a long history are not fixed or unchangeable as noted also by a revisit of child welfare institutions in England (Berridge & Brodie, 1998). That first study was my PhD study, published in 1993 (Pösö, 1993) focusing on the social constructs of “deviance” of the young people placed in three reform schools. The second study was 10 years later in two of the reform schools involved in the first study, now looking at the lived experiences of the young residents (Pösö, 2004), with a separate interest in their understanding of violence (Honkatukia et al., 2003, 2006). Both times I stayed in the institutions for several months and took part in the daily activities of the institutions in a variety of ways, carried out interviews, some recorded, some not, read documents, and asked young people to take photographs, that is to say, whatever there was to do when you study 24/7 out-of-home care ethnographically. I returned to the institutions later to do some focus group interviews with young people about restrictive practices as well as for some occasional visits for other purposes. This later study was not ethnographic and is not therefore given much attention here.

When revisiting the reform schools for my second study, I realized that my age had become an issue. First, it was an issue for other people, including research colleagues and child welfare practitioners as they commented on my study expressing doubts about whether I could understand the teenagers’ language and their ways of being as I was so “old” (as if age was the only uniting or separating factor in our encounters). When doing my first ethnography, I did not think much of my age. Other people did not remark on it either, as assumably a PhD student in her late twenties was not very different from other students doing research in the reform schools or similar contexts. An associate professor in her late thirties,

involved in educating future professionals for social work, is different in many ways. The remarks about being “old” included concerns of social distance and barriers of communication and understanding. More experience could of course also give more assets for communication skills and flexibility to move around the ethnographic site but the comments excluded those aspects. Although I do not agree with the binary views that age as such is either a resource or an obstacle to fieldwork, I fully agree that age-related matters have their impact on fieldwork but in more mixed ways as they are intertwined in the very ways of being in relations, listening, asking questions, hearing, and making sense of it all.

The complexity of age-related matters became evident in the first hours of my first visit to the second study. I returned to the reform school where I had spent many months in the first study and was picked up by a familiar staff member in a minibus from the railway station. This institution was—as they all were and still are—located far away from urban centers and public transport. The journeys between the station and the institution, sometimes together with young residents returning from their visits to home, were always important opportunities to catch upon news during both studies. This time the driver of the minibus remembered me and I remembered her. Together we discussed the years between the past period shared and the present. I was told that the young people ending up in the reform schools were in much more difficult conditions “now” than they were earlier. She told, for example, about young people who entered the reform schools without any reading skills, which, in the Finnish society of that time, was a very unusual indicator of being lost in the education system. The stories of the present residential life were emotionally rich, loaded with sadness about the fates of young residents. She told about her own children, born after our previous encounters, and contrasted them with the young residents, again with sadness about the differences in care and love they experienced. We also shared some experiences of the impact of having children of one’s own on the ways how one meets children in care; this was a new topic for both of us as 10 years earlier neither of us had children of our own. The portrait painted to me was full of concerns and worries about the deterioration of the lives of young people ending up in reform schools and the services provided to support them, making a clear distinction between the past and present.

This portrait became intensified during the periods of stay in the institution. There were also other staff members whom I remembered well and who remembered me and the discussions circulated around the same topics of things being more difficult than 10 years previously. The very fact that I had been there before made these accounts possible; they also shaped my understanding of the present at that time. The talks with young people did not change that portrait of sadness and concerns as I will describe later. The portrait was only intensified by the fact that the young residents were just some years older than my own children, yet they had gone through so much, and the child welfare system, the topic of my teaching and other university activities as an associate professor in social work, had failed them in so many ways. As an ethnographer, I had changed as I knew more about research in general but also in relation to the young residents as a private person from the age of a “big sister” to “a mother” and in relation to the institution from a student to an expert. In consequence, what I “saw” was very different in these two studies 10 years apart. Playing with my idea to return there still once is an issue to consider, personally, academically, and morally. What would be certain, however, is that the position of a retiring professor of social work, at the age of a grandmother to the young residents, would leave its mark again on doing ethnographic work.

My age—or myself—is not, obviously, the key issue here but rather the relations it enables; it is more or less directly an intertwined and influencing factor in the “interpersonal field” (term: Coffey, 1999). It is also a factor that one cannot do much about as age acquires its meaning in social interaction; nevertheless, ethnographic data cannot exist without it. Age in a general sense is also an institutional topic which is problematized in current guidelines of academia when setting the platform for studying children. This will be demonstrated in the next section before going into more detail with regard to relational dynamics of ethnographic fieldwork.

Regulated Field Relations and Risk Awareness About Adult Researchers

In contrast with the previous fieldwork periods, being an adult studying children and young people is nowadays tightly regulated by the current research ethics codes as are the very relations and practices in research encounters. Previously, a variety of formal and informal permits were required but they did not specify the adult–child relations as a topic for negotiations or scrutiny as they do now. My own research started by contacting the reform school leaders in the late 1980s to discuss the opportunity to do an ethnography there. They all welcomed me and especially the idea that it would not be a short visit. I have recorded notes saying that their view was that a long-lasting ethnography would give a fairer analysis of the complexities of the institutions. There was one condition: I should not participate in any situations against the wishes of the young people. I visited all reform schools and decided to include three of them in my study. As gender-related constructions of troublesome behavior were the focus of my research at the time, I chose two single-sex institutions and one that was mixed. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health granted me permission to do my study. I shared information about my study in the institutions by attending classrooms to meet all the young people residing in those institutions at that moment as well as staff meetings, handing out short leaflets, and spending time in the residential common rooms to introduce myself. As I also wanted to study the case files of young people, I was given a key to the office where the files were kept and spent several evenings there coding information. When it was time to talk with someone or attend a treatment session, I always asked whether it was alright for me to join; if it was, I stayed. I think I had a “business card” of some kind to give to the parents who shared the guest rooms with me for overnight stays to show who I was. We did not exchange any signed contracts about talking together.

It was equally easy to obtain access to the reform schools 10 years later: I contacted the head of the reform school that still existed and was immediately welcomed. I chose the other institution to represent some of the new features of the reform schools at that time: the chosen institution included some family-run units in addition to the reform school wards. The permission granted by the reform school leaders gave me formal access, and other types of access were negotiated in a similar way to earlier. Permissions to interview or to attend meetings, for example, were then negotiated on a case-by-case basis, and the negotiations

varied during the fieldwork periods, suggesting a situational and relational approach to research ethics (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

The entry and access to studying reform schools would be very different now as research in general and research with children in particular are more regulated (e.g. Alderson & Morrow, 2011). If I started a new study now, the review of an ethics committee would be needed first and after that, the permission to do the study would be granted by the National Institute of Health and Social Affairs. According to their current instructions, they would need the application plus 13 compulsory appendices. These requests for material follow not only common research ethics as well as data integrity and security guidelines (as for all studies at the moment) but also norms for people working with children. I should include a certificate of my criminal record (or the lack thereof) to show that I am not a risk to young people. I should also provide consent forms for young people to sign to prove that they participate voluntarily in the study, drafts of the interview schemes as well as details of data security and data management to show how I would store and work with the data. I should also contact the parents of those children who are under the age of 15 and have their permissions and consent forms signed to complement those signed by the young people and staff members. I might also have to contact the children's child welfare agencies that placed them as well to ask for further permission to speak with the children. It is likely that I would not have any easy access to read the case files—other permissions would be needed and specific data security, highly priced, would be required.

In the current frame of regulations, as a researcher and an adult entering the institution, I pose a possible risk to children against which they should be protected and the gate-keeping bodies need to minimize the risk I might pose. As I have previous experience with ethics regulation based on minimal bureaucracy and on trust and situated negotiations, I imagine that I could be a very hesitant ethnographer as I would enter the field with a multitude of forms and formalities in my mind, and with a mindset which categorizes people and situations into those where “permission to study” has been granted and formalized and those that are beyond my rights as a researcher. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019, p. 44) use the term “rude surprises” to describe unwelcome episodes involved in entering the field; for

my imagined study, indeed, the new formalized practices and regulations are “a rude surprise” even before entering the field. Furthermore, if proposing a revisiting study to reform schools, the very idea of ethnography would also need to be considered in relation to the adult–child relationships in theoretical and methodological terms. There is a growing body of literature highlighting the ways in which adult researchers objectify children and how the design of an adult as the researcher and a child as the one researched may reflect symbolic violence and that these issues should be of particular concern for research in child welfare (Kiili et al., 2021). Adult-led research as such could thus be seen as being a risk or academically problematic, suggesting that in order to obtain academic approval for my imagined study, there would be a need to solidly argue for the way of being an adult researcher and the relevance of knowledge emerging from these relations, or, alternatively, to introduce a design of a non-adult ethnography.

The requirements for proof of non-risks and the arguments for adult-led research would, however, be a task for any *adult* researcher, not only for an older one. For older researchers, the current (risk) awareness of child–adult relations in research and the emphasis on children’s rights to produce knowledge on their own mean that they need to problematize the traditions and customs of doing research learnt and established earlier in their careers. My notes and (nostalgic?) memories about trust and negotiations in research relations, for example, may exclude the age-related power imbalance there must have been but which, at that time, were seen as any relations between the (adult) researcher and the (adult) researched. The younger researchers may have internalized the rights of children as knowledge producers as part of their (academic) life course and have positioned themselves in the studies with/about/by children (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011), Thomas, 2021). This is related to academic generations and how they learn to think of their roles as researchers. However, regardless of the age of the researcher, age is indeed more than the individual asset of the (adult) ethnographer as it currently defines the formal preconditions of the design for ethnography in a human service organization for children, that is, the relations in the site and the very right to be there.

The Mundane (Embodied) Doing of Fieldwork

While writing about the embodiment of ethnographic fieldwork in her textbook about the ethnographic self, Amanda Coffey (1999) writes about the presence of the body in fieldwork relations and its textual representations, and highlights issues varying from the sex of the ethnographer to his/her appearance. However, the age of the ethnographer or age-related issues of embodied fieldwork seem to be a topic that has been given relatively little attention in that book or elsewhere. Assumingly, the adult body of the ethnographer as the standard body is taken for granted, and other elements of the body are seen as being more methodologically influential and interesting.

The few self-reports that explore the impact of the aged body on fieldwork highlight the methodological interrelations between the age of the body and the field relations. This is evident, for example, in the reflections of a late middle-aged researcher studying ethnographically the military service of young men in Finland ethnographically (Hoikkala et al., 2009). He, along with two younger colleagues, took part in military training activities, including long marches and camping in the woods in the middle of the Finnish winter. He writes about the age difference and how his body stood out as an exception among those more than 30 years younger than himself, even more so during physically tough exercises. When reading the report, it is obvious that the age—and in this case, the aging—of the body indeed shapes field relations and it becomes intertwined with his role as a man among other men, and consequently, the interpretations of the field. Age and its impact on his body is indeed the topic which the researcher elaborates in detail, possibly even more than other individual traits, in relation to his understanding of military service and its approach to health education.

Studying reform schools is different from studying military service or any such sites in which the body of the researcher is at risk and therefore likely to be reflected on. Nevertheless, regardless of the site, ethnography is embodied work and so is reform school ethnography. Its embodied nature is also temporally structured—as any social practice is (Moran, 2015; Atkinson, 2017). Residential life is 24/7—it is very much a temporally intense

social practice (Moran, 2015) —and nighttime has a special status in the daily running of residential care: the beginning and end of nighttime are regulated (young people needed to go to their rooms and wake up at certain times), nighttime regulations differ according to the days of the week (weekends had looser regulations) and time of year (school terms were more strictly regulated than holiday seasons), and there are (or there used to be) special members of staff doing night shifts, among many other factors. It is a very private period of residential life as everyone is in their own rooms, surrounded by quietness and darkness. It is also a sensitive period of loneliness, longing, fears, and nightmares. For an ethnographer of residential care, it is a period not to be missed. As a young researcher during my first study, not feeling sleepy in the middle of the night, I managed to talk with the people on night shift and sense the atmosphere of the nighttime wards. Later, during my second study, I did not even try to visit the units during nighttime as the physical space had been changed to be very private: the units were small and some of them were located in the family homes of the staff. How could I enter those private spaces during the night? I did attend some early morning activities in the wards when everyone was getting ready to have breakfast and go to school but missed night hours. If I ever visit the institutions again, I would struggle—due to my age and its impact on me—to stay awake to do those ethnographic night shifts. This would introduce some weakness to the data as I would miss the chance, for example, to see how much of nighttime security has been replaced by technical monitoring, a topic that was discussed during my previous field period as a future alternative. Technical monitoring is often remarked upon by young people who have exited these institutions in recent years; ethnography on a reform school would be quite thin if it lacked firsthand observations of technical monitoring in nighttime action, especially without seeing how technical monitoring is linked with the institutional aim of providing a platform for “positive growth.”

Staying awake at the night is one tiny and mundane example of embodied fieldwork. The literature is rife with much more exciting examples of embodied fieldwork and risks related to violence, harassment, or accidents which (young adult) researchers encounter in their work. Staying awake is, however, a reminder that ethnographic fieldwork depends on the body in a variety of ways. The recent interest in walking methods (e.g., O'Neill &

Roberts, 2020) builds on the idea of body competencies of the ethnographer as one who can “walk” and “move.” There are many issues related to the competencies of the body that have been taken for granted, some of which are not age-related at all, although they enable on the one hand, and limit or exclude, on the other hand, opportunities to be in field relations. However, doing ethnographic fieldwork is not only “about being” in one’s body “there” but also about thinking about what one sees and remembering it, or, as Coffey (1992, p. 27) puts it, it is “about experiencing and remembering, ordering and giving frameworks to our memories.” Taking notes, intermediating, and ordering experiences and remembering have changed over the years with the emergence of new equipment and ways of thinking of note-taking (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, pp. 152–153). Hardly anyone writes notes with a pen on endless notepads as I did during my first study and even the progress I experienced in my second study of having a personal laptop to record notes might not be so cherished nowadays; instead, many researchers may just audio or video record their observations and even ask the ones researched to do that themselves in less researcher-led designs. Taking notes is about capturing and re-representing the ethnographic site for later use, which can be done systematically or non-systematically, and consequently, ethnographic memory is not only supported by note-taking but also shaped by it. Notes can be destroyed by accident or by institutional regulations regarding the norms of data storage or other reasons (as my notes of the first and second periods had to be destroyed), whereas the human memory of the ethnographer functions differently: it cannot be destroyed by external commands, and neither can one control what is forgotten and what (and how) is remembered. For revisiting ethnographic sites, remembering, forgetting, and the archives of notes of different kinds are essential resources. The temporal layers of memories and forgotten people, buildings, and episodes of interactions are, however, not fixed but dynamic objects for re-interpretations (e.g., Misztal, 2003). The more years you have and the more visits to the site you have done, the more opportunities for forgetting and re-interpreting you have.

Generational and Professional Relations

When entering the reform schools for the second time, 10 years after the first ethnographic period, I was reminded that I might not understand the “youth culture” of that time due to the age difference between the young residents and myself. For me, the age difference was an issue, among other issues, to negotiate during the fieldwork—the very reason for doing ethnography was to learn to know what “youth culture” was when focusing on young people’s views and experiences of reform school life. Obviously, there was a need for translations of different kinds, one of them being the translation between generations (but I also struggled to understand that the pictures of flowers drawn on young people’s notebooks resembled cannabis leaves and thus had more meanings than just being “pretty drawings”). That is why I provided cameras to the young people to take pictures of what was important in reform school life. The pictures were to be shared with me and explained in words. When it was time to discuss the pictures, many of which were of the young people themselves, or of other young people and some details of the reform school buildings (e.g., windows, fridges), I noted one overall message: loneliness. The pictures showing young people having fun in the classrooms or in the living units were not merely about being in peer relations but about being outside those relations, which is about being lonely. This clash between the words and the pictures is a challenge for any researcher (Pink, 2001); I followed the interpretation of loneliness as it emerged in many episodes during my stays there: the young people spoke about it—in length or in passing—when I met them in the interview sessions; peer relations were described as conditional, and parents were spoken about in very limited words. The staff told that it was very rare for young people to have visits from their family members, and the previously important family-centered working methods had lost their meaning due to the lack of contact with families. I did not meet many parents during the fieldwork periods, which was in stark contrast to the evenings spent with visiting parents in the guest rooms 10 years earlier when parents visited their children frequently. The interpretation of loneliness was indeed tested and further elaborated in many field episodes and many encounters and became of the key findings of the study. I imagine that I would equally need translations for many words and signs used by young people if I ever start a new ethnographic period. However, I would not see the reason for the need for a variety of translations as only my “old age” or

generational differences; instead, the very nature of ethnography requires the ethnographer to learn how the social world is accomplished in his/her particular site and to be alert about the emerging interpretations and constantly test and elaborate them. In fact, “old age” could give the privilege to ask silly questions as generational differences are so obvious in relation with teenagers.

In fact, my professional mindset as a social work professor troubles me more than my age and age-related issues if I ever start the third period in the reform schools. When doing my second period, I, as a mid-career social work university teacher, felt ashamed of not having understood the transformation of the welfare services and the ways in which some young people had been excluded from the services during their childhood troubles. There were, as mentioned before, young people who had not learnt to read properly as they had been running away from their school for so many years—truly an anomaly in the Finnish education system—suggesting that there were children who had dropped out of many ordinary childhood environments as was later documented in research highlighting childhoods during the years of economic recession in Finland. I should have known about those changes as a university teacher, but my research activities had focused on other issues. Therefore, the stories I heard in the reform schools surprised me and troubled me professionally. During the first period, 10 years earlier, I was free from such professional self-criticism as I was just a PhD student interested in (gendered) social problem constructions. These positions must have been reflected in the fieldwork and in my relations with the residential actors. During the first period, I observed staff (how they acted and contributed to the problem constructions), but during the second period, I needed them to explain to me what had happened during the 10 years. My professional self-criticism was strengthened by the new strong role of psychiatric discourse evident in some parts of practice. When reading the case files of the young people, the overarching frame for approaching the young people’s needs for residential care was worded with psychological and psychiatric terminology in clear contrast to the frame of norm-breaking behavior 10 years earlier. For making sense of the residential life of that time, it was quite a mixture of competing frames: my self-criticism about not knowing the recent changes in society, the institutional frame of

disorders to position young people and their needs in the reform schools, and the frame of loneliness, emerging in many parts of the fieldwork.

Ten years earlier, as a junior researcher, I “saw” more rebellion and protest against social norms, and, consequently, young people as protestors and ones to rebel (and staff as those trying to cope with the protests). It was supported by my theoretical background—the social constructionist reading of “deviance” and social problems—and I did not much doubt my interpretations. To support my interpretations, I collected a solid data set, stayed for several months in the institutions, analyzed my data systematically, and reported in detail how I came to my conclusions; in other words, followed all the steps which at the time were required for a valid qualitative analysis, supported by the variety of textbooks on ethnography of that time. There is no way to know now how much my age and short experience of child welfare and research influenced my interpretations. I only know that it would be different if I ever start a new project. I find it difficult to imagine what “a path towards positive growth,” the present frame worded on the website, would look like in the everyday practice of reform schools. What I know is that if I ever enter the reform schools again, I would be more aware than before that it is the *present* frame, taking place in a certain temporal and social context instead of being “the” frame for reform schools. This would certainly be reflected in the relations with staff and young people alike: there would be even more questions asked. If I anticipate the answers, I would be inclined to assume that staff and young people would take some time and effort to explain this “new” paradigm to someone who is an “old academic”, ignorant and distant from the current way of doing residential care. As a retiring academic, at the margins of the field of child welfare policy, I would not pose any threat as an expert to the staff. For young people, my grandmother age would most likely emphasize my interest as an ethnographer to listen to their accounts of residential life without any hurry and judgment.

The researcher being treated as ignorant is not necessarily a bad thing for ethnographic data as it helps to make contextual practices “known”. The essence of contextual practices and their meaning-making is demonstrated by a recent study looking at adult–child touch in residential settings (Warwick, 2022). The study argues that adult–child touch should not be isolated from the relations in residential settings as touching as a bodily

contact acquires its meanings in those relations in that particular residential context. This is to say that the appropriateness or inappropriateness of touching, for example, is far from binary in nature in the residential context and the task of an ethnographer would be to capture the spectrum and variability of those meanings. It is the task of the ethnographer not to know the meanings before the fieldwork but to learn to know them as being constituted (e.g., Buckholdt & Gubrium, 1979; Bengtsson, 2012). To do that, generational or age-related sameness could be equally problematic or beneficial as generational and age differences. It is, after all, the relations which constitute most of the data in residential settings, and there is no fixed way of what they would or should be like.

Concluding Remarks

Although this chapter was initiated by my memories of revisiting residential care as an ethnographer and my interest in doing it once more, the intention has not been to provide an autoethnographical account. “My old age” is not really “me” but it is one of the many ethnographical assets which crafts ethnographic fieldwork. It might not be one of the most essential assets, but it is an inevitable feature of any ethnographer and any field site and more so in age-divided human service organizations. I have demonstrated earlier some issues related to age and generations which might not be so evident (for young researchers). I have also concluded that “my old age” would not be any better or worse than “my young age” (or vice versa) as all ethnographic fieldwork is shaped by relations in the field and the ethnographer in any case influences those relations and the emerging data. That is why I do not necessarily agree with the proposals that children and young people should be only studied by other children and young people for the sake of democracy of knowledge production. Whether young or old, the ethnographic data is situated, relational and contextual.

While being situated and contextual, also temporally, ethnographic follow-up studies could indeed be helpful in challenging the “ethnographic present” and its temporal limitations. I have demonstrated how “rebellion”, “loneliness”, or “paths towards positive

growth” are time-related frames for ethnographic understanding of residential life. Despite being time-related, there is also continuity: year after year, fieldwork period after fieldwork period, the institutions provide a place of residence for young people who are seen to be in need of care out of their homes and they employ staff to work with these young people as they have done for the last 140 years or so. If one agrees that the task to understand the continuities and discontinuities of residential life is a task for ethnographers and not only for historians, it provides a sound methodological challenge for those both younger and older among us. Ethnographic research is not at its strongest when exploring the social and political factors shaping the different rationales and frames for residential care, but it is at its strongest when highlighting how they are accomplished in practice in their specific temporal contexts.

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