

# Approaching responsibility: A sensory approach to reflexivity on researcher-participant relations

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## Abstract

Feminist researchers have long argued that reflexivity is key to a responsible research practice. As a method, reflexivity has the capacity to reveal power relations and highlight situated perspectives. Consequently, it has become a mainstream tool in qualitative research. Yet it has also been criticised for producing tick-the-box reflections and promoting a researcher-centric narrative that undermines participants' contributions to knowledge production. This article takes a sensory approach to reflexivity and considers its methodological implications. Borrowing our interpretation of recognisability from Skeggs (1997), and that of emplacement from Pink's (2015) conceptualisation of sensory ethnography, we use the compound concept of 'recognisable emplacement' as a reflexive theoretical lens with which to analyse the researcher-participant relationship. We are furthermore methodologically inspired by duo-ethnography in that we as co-authors create a collective and reflexive space for analysis. The analysis therefore enables us to illustrate the dynamic negotiations between participants, environment, and researcher, and to shed light on the sensory cues that form these negotiations. Based on an understanding of responsibility as a multifaceted and situated practice we suggest that a sensory approach to reflexivity increases the researcher's capacity to take responsibility by foregrounding the intersubjectivity of researcher-participant relations.

**KEYWORDS:** Responsibility, reflexivity, sensory ethnography, recognition, emplacement, researcher-participant relationship

The idea for this article came from a wish to engage more profoundly with the practice of reflexivity to address researcher-participant relationships in our field of educational research. As PhD students and thus relatively new to the research profession, we often find ourselves getting involved in discussions about how to understand the concept of the 'responsible researcher' (cf., Haraway 1991; Riach 2009; Skeggs 2002). How do we balance our personal and professional identities while striving to achieve a good rapport with children and youth? How can we be respectful of the knowledge and experience of the participants in our studies, while taking on the role of interpreting and analysing them? We struggled to incorporate a practice of reflexivity that could address these and similar questions while avoiding the shallowness of the endless 'etc.' that comes with merely accounting for the identity categorisations to which one belongs. As Butler (1999, 182) has noted, such identity predicates "strive to encompass a situated subject but invariably fail to be complete". We therefore imagine this article as a methodological exploration that illustrates the practice of reflexivity in motion. We set out to examine researcher-participant relationships and discuss how reflexivity enables a responsible feminist research practice – specifically in educational research involving children and youth. By doing so, we do not presume to demonstrate a 'best practice'. We rather want to contribute to the literature on what reflexivity can look like and what (and how) we learn from practicing it as early career researchers in the educational field. In short, we wanted to write the article we ourselves needed to read, while hopefully becoming more responsible researchers along the way.

Reflexivity was originally conceptualised as an approach to the examination of researcher subjectivity with the aim of producing transparent accounts of the position from which the researcher views the world (O'Boyle 2018; Willis & Siltanen 2009). Its inception came about as critical researchers had argued that discursively produced categories of social identity are silent co-producers of knowledge in any research endeavour, and thus questioned the concept of

objectivity (Haraway 1988; Davies & Harré 1990; Rose 1997). Pierre Bourdieu famously developed his concept of reflexive sociology to highlight the importance of critical examinations of the researcher role to avoid taking and reproducing an objectifying gaze (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Researchers must therefore acknowledge how they are embedded in theoretical and methodological frames for interpretation and should question what it means to do research within certain traditions of thought. Feminist ethnography arguably presupposes critical reflexivity, as it has traditionally accentuated the problematisation of power relations in the researcher-participant relationship and highlighted an intersubjective approach to knowledge production (Davids & Willemse 2014; Pedersen & Gunnarsson 2004; Pillow 2003; Riach 2009). As Pillow (2003, 178) states: "Reflexivity under feminism is not only about investigating the power embedded in one's research but is also about doing research differently". Nowadays, reflexively exploring the researcher-participant relationship is central to qualitative inquiries (Berger 2015; Davids 2014; Harrington 2003; Pillow 2003; O'Boyle 2018), and is an important tenet of responsible research, where the researcher is committed to continuous ethical reflections as well as methodological adjustments throughout the research process (e.g., Davids 2014; Davids & Willemse 2014; Haraway 1988; Mies 1993; Nencel 2014; Skeggs 1997; 2002; van Stapele 2014).

The lack (and impossibility) of a clear-cut script for how to perform a qualitative, feminist reflexivity has produced a large span of techniques to approach the matter. Critiques have been directed towards two interconnected trends. The first addresses a reflexivity practice that is too shallow, meaning that it only incorporates symbolic and empty *pro forma* statements of identity, without allowing reflexivity to contribute in terms of epistemological, ethical, or analytical aspects of research (Pillow 2003). Secondly, if a reflexivity practice becomes too centred on the identity, actions, and inner life of the researcher, it results in the overshadowing of the participants as competent actors in knowledge production (O'Boyle

2018; Skeggs 2002). The main challenge for reflexivity as a research practice is thus to avoid it becoming a tool for self-indulgent navel-gazing and tick-the-box accounts of researcher identities rather than being a means to conduct more responsible research (O'Boyle 2018; Pillow 2003; Riach 2009). Drawing on empirical data from a PhD project focusing on students in Danish secondary schools, this article approaches reflexivity within the framework of sensory ethnography. In the latter, the encounter between researcher and participant is understood as a process of negotiation where subjectivities are constantly resituated and remade in relation to each other. According to Pink (2015, 38), sensory ethnography is a reflexive project as it:

*[...] invokes the inevitable question of how researchers themselves are entangled in, participate in the production of and are co-present in the ethnographic places they share with research participants, their materialities and power relations.*

In a sensory ethnography it is thus implicit that the researcher is always speaking from a certain place and trying to understand the emplacement of others, which leads to a constant questioning of how such knowledge can become available to us. Our understanding of 'emplacement' will be unfolded in an upcoming section. For our analysis, we will use three empirical examples to explore how sensory subjectivities are negotiated on the basis of value-laden categorisations. We also explore how they shift through situated entanglement with other subjectivities. We will argue that engaging in a reflexive practice with a sensory outlook makes new ethnographic knowledge possible while allowing the researcher to explore the intersubjectivity of the researcher-participant relationship, thus strengthening the capacity to conduct responsible research.

## Reflexivity and the researcher-participant relationship

As was mentioned above, reflexivity is a much-used tool in the exploration of researcher-participant relationships in ethnographic research. One central issue addressed by researchers through reflexive practices is the so-called *involvement paradox*. The latter concept refers to the constant and intricate balance that qualitative researchers must navigate between being an active participant in the lives and contexts of participants and keeping a professional distance (Anteby 2013; Langley & Klag 2017). The underlying assumption is that an overly involved researcher will develop blind spots that hinder a nuanced analysis. Meanwhile, the conceptualisation of the paradox builds on the idea that distance equals more neutrality and objectivity, a contention that has consistently been challenged by feminist ethnographers (Haraway 1988; Lather 2006; Mies 1993). As noted by Langley & Klag (2017), there is a broad consensus that representation of lived experience in academic research is only made possible by 'being there' to some extent. It is equally clear that 'being there' influences both the 'being' and the 'there' in significant ways (Cunliffe & Karunanayake 2013; Haraway 1988). These discussions are echoed in the literature on insider/outsider positions, which highlights the different dynamics that the presence or absence of shared lived experiences impose on a research situation (Berger 2015; Dwyer & Buckle 2009; Alderson & Morrow 2011). Having insider status implies having personal knowledge about the field from a participant standpoint and thereby an intimacy with the norms and rationales to which participants are subjected. Being an insider can significantly help with issues of access and the establishment of trust and rapport but can also subject the researcher to complex ethical dilemmas (Harrington 2003; Merriam et al. 2001; Spanger 2012). An outsider perspective can in turn have its own benefits, including a naïve curiosity that elicits fuller explanations from participants than they would give to somebody assumed to be in the know (Merriam et al. 2001). Importantly, thinking about insider/outsider in terms

of an 'either or' rather than a spectrum makes for a blunt reflection tool, which has been addressed by several authors (e.g., Dwyer & Buckle 2009; Li 2018; Merriam et al. 2001; Spanger 2012; O'Boyle 2018).

Besides addressing the fluidity of researcher emplacements, previous literature has demonstrated how reflexivity can highlight the important role that participants themselves play as co-producers of knowledge. Analysing researcher-participant relationships as an interplay between intersecting social positions, Qvortrup (2012) uses the concepts of disidentification and counter power to address antagonistic situations that were played out in his fieldwork. In so doing, he explores the ways in which the minoritised men in his study perceived him as a symbol of mainstream society, which enabled them to express their antagonistic relationship to society in general by challenging his researcher position. In her ethnographic study in a psychiatric ward in Denmark, Ringer (2013) has furthermore explored how the researcher positions made available to her by the staff and patients in her study became a source of knowledge about norms in the mental health services. Taking this as her point of departure for reflexive practice, Ringer (2013) uncovered several ways in which patients resisted objectifying practices they were subjected to by the institutions they were in – but also by her as a researcher. The researcher-participant relationship is thus never merely the meeting of two people and their personal motivations, but is also a negotiation between contexts, norms, and materiality, where participants affect knowledge production in significant ways.

As was seen above, addressing the researcher-participant relationship reflexively is by no means an under-theorised matter. Our contribution is to portray reflexivity in motion, using a sensory approach to learn more about the dynamics of researcher-participant relationships and develop our capacity for responsible research. In the following section, we outline our theoretical approach to reflexivity by introducing a compound concept called 'recognisable emplacement'.

## Recognisable emplacement

In this paper, we analyse the researcher-participant relationship as an ongoing 'recognisable emplacement' in order to inform our practice of a responsible feminist reflexivity. 'Recognisability' is a term we borrow from Beverly Skeggs (1997), whereas emplacement derives from Sarah Pink (2015).

Skeggs (1997) describes the first part of the concept, *recognisable*, as the ways in which social categories are represented by and through our bodies. Embodied actions like language choices, tone of voice, and bodily gestures work together with material attributes like clothing, jewellery, and hairstyle to emit signals of our place in the world, and in so doing make our bodies inescapably available for evaluation by others (Skeggs 1997). Recognition is thus the act of placing these expressions in a larger socio-cultural context while assigning value to them. When we enter an educational setting as researchers, we are walking into a pre-existing cultural context where our bodies and bodily expressions become recognisable to the students and teachers in certain ways – and vice versa (cf. Harrington 2003; Li 2018; Ringer 2013; Skeggs 1997). During a recent visit in a school, the co-author experienced how a teacher who himself had an academic background eagerly<sup>1</sup> shared details of his thesis work to establish common ground with her. This teacher was excited about her observing his class as he himself had experience with using that method. Negotiation of recognition is in this way central when it comes to establishing relationships between us as researchers and the participants in our studies.

We will furthermore draw on the concept of emplacement as an alternative to concepts like position, identity, or role. Our understanding of *emplacement* is interpreted from Pink (2015, 28), who argues that emplaced ethnography "attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment." According to this description, emplacement supersedes embodiment by placing larger emphasis on contextual factors in the environment as well

foregrounding sensory experiences. Sensoriality, according to Pink (2015), entails the researchers' embodied and historically informed experiences, which are central to how they understand the past, interact with the present, and imagine the future. A sensory approach is therefore more than just a registration of smells or the lighting in a room – it includes the experience of social tensions, moods, and atmospheres as well as knowledge about the norms that create them. Sensoriality is implicit and often silenced bodily knowledge that is co-produced in an interplay between participants and the research environment. Sensory ethnography thus emphasises the whole body – conscious and subconscious – as an instrument to navigate sociocultural practices during fieldwork and is thereby inherently reflexive in its practice. In its emphasis on the socio-material context of surroundings, the concept of emplacement therefore gives voice and place to implicit, sensed knowledge (Pink 2015).

We will use 'recognition' or 'recognisable' to refer to the process whereby the researcher is given value and emplacement as the physical and sociocultural position that is being spoken from – a position that is negotiated by recognisable bodily signs and actions expressing relations to norms and social hierarchies. By conjoining recognisable and emplacement as one analytical concept, we can analyse *how* the researcher is recognised and from *where* the researcher is emplaced when engaging with participants. Recognisable emplacement is a tool for reflexivity as it enables the analysis of how a specific relationship is negotiated between researcher and participant. Importantly, we view the emplacement in terms of researcher-participant relationships as fluid and non-linear because of its ability to be renegotiated in different forms. Thus, a specific emplacement can lead to a negotiation resulting in new recognitions, and a specific recognition can trigger the negotiation of a new emplacement.

Analysing the researcher-participant relationship in terms of recognisable emplacement, we tap into the critique concerning researchers' ability to establish a role in the field and remain bound to it throughout the research process (e.g.,

Harrington 2003; Ringer 2013). By doing so, researchers ignore how participants actively negotiate emplacement and recognisability in implicit ways and how emplacement and recognisability are thereby constantly malleable. With our conceptualisation of recognisable emplacement, we therefore want to acknowledge the participants as active, and sometimes dominant, parties in the negotiation of researcher-participant relationships.

## Method

The authors of this article both work with educational research in Denmark and conduct fieldwork in schools. We also share some methodological and theoretical perspectives, mainly in terms of being inspired by feminist, queer, and intersectional approaches. Our research foci are however different, as we work respectively with students' conceptions of health and well-being, and teachers' understanding of dis/ability in inclusive education. Working on this article has thus been a way for us to learn from each other's experiences of fieldwork in a school setting. It has involved a cooperative and mutual effort to deepen our understanding of the participant-researcher dynamic and strengthen our capacity to take responsibility for future research processes. In this article we make use of Justenborg's empirical data, as she is further along in her PhD and has more extensive material. However, we use our different researcher emplacements actively, performing a joint analysis incorporating both insider (as data producer) and outsider (as discussant) perspectives. Even though our method falls short of being a duo-ethnographic analysis, it does borrow some of the elements from this approach, e.g., viewing differences between authors as a strength, taking on the dual role of researcher and researched in the analytical process, a reflexive focus, and the use of memory prompts to unfold narratives (cf. Sawyer & Norris 2009). The analysis is, however, not written in the characteristic, duo-ethnographic style of a dialogue. Instead, the dialogue took place behind the scenes, and the resulting joint

analytical understanding and reflection will be unfolded here.

The initial style of Justenborg's fieldwork was explorative, which in practice meant that she noted as many details about the environment of the school and her interactions with participants as possible. It also meant that her style of note-taking was not informed by a sensory ethnography approach at the time, but rather inspired by Geertz's (1973) principles of thick descriptions and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). When we decided to pursue a sensory-focused path to our analysis in this article, we therefore spent significant time tending to the empirical examples. Although most of the information was present in Justenborg's original field notes, there were contextual cues and details of sensory experience missing due to the lack of a structurally applied sensory approach. A central component of our co-authorship has therefore been the reconstruction of the empirical examples through lengthy discussion, where Nilsson facilitated the recollection of additional sensory details. Justenborg had initially brought six extracts from her fieldnotes that described situations where researcher-participant roles were being negotiated. Each example was then discussed at length with Nilsson asking questions about what preceded the interaction, what Justenborg was feeling in the situation and why, what the atmosphere was like, what tone of voice was used in an exchange, what facial movements or small gestures were made and how were they received. Questions were also raised regarding later relationships and interactions with the same students, including anything and everything that could contribute to a more nuanced description with a special focus on sensory details. Based on these conversations Nilsson then rewrote the example in her own words, prompting new discussions and additions from Justenborg. At the end we were left with the version of the material that is included here, which represents a joint reconstruction of Justenborg's original fieldnotes. If Justenborg was unsure about an aspect of the situation (body language, tone of voice, or other details) this was left out. Half of the original examples were discarded mainly because the

recollection process could not contribute enough sensory details to support the intended analysis.

Justenborg conducted fieldwork observations in six classes (two classes each in the fifth, seventh, and ninth grades) in two schools from May to June of 2019 and performed four focus group interviews with a total of 18 ninth-graders from two other schools between August 2021 and January 2022. The participating students came from four Danish public primary and secondary schools and were between 11 and 15 years old. Two of the three examples presented below derive from fieldwork observations with seventh-graders, and the last example comes from a focus group interview with ninth-graders.

As noted by Davis (2014, 22), locating yourself as a researcher is key to enabling a "production of feminist knowledge that is accountable, reflexive and admittedly partial". However, as previously mentioned, one of our aims with the explorative approach to reflexivity that we exemplify in this paper is to avoid stagnating our reflexive practice in a listing of fixed social categories. Situating oneself should only be a small part of the practice of reflexivity – the important part is letting those categories go to work analytically and inform ethical considerations (Davis 2014; Skeggs 2002). The purpose of presenting Justenborg is thus to provide a contextualisation of our upcoming analysis, in which these categorisations become pieces of the analytical puzzle. Furthermore, social categories are plentiful, and are therefore necessarily subject to a selection process to make the analysis meaningful (Phoenix 2006; Delgado 2011). That said, Justenborg is a cis-gendered white woman who at the time of the research was in her late twenties and early thirties. She is Danish, grew up in Denmark, and attended Danish state school institutions.

A common assumption is that the more alike the researcher and participants in a study are, the easier the access to their authentic opinions and experiences will be, which in turn is assumed to strengthen the validity of the research (Merriam et al. 2001; Aiello & Nero 2019; Ringer 2013). Pink (2015) moreover describes how researchers, by aligning their and participants' bodies, can create

correspondence between experiences and move towards a similar emplacement. As the subject of her research contains sensitive elements about personal health, well-being, and body image, making the establishment of rapport important, Justenborg intuitively approached her fieldwork with the intention of creating trust and relatability with the students by emphasising similarities. Akin to Ringer's (2013) approach, she decided to align herself visibly with the participants of her study, the students. She did not want to be recognised as a teacher, as that comes with connotations of authority that might make students more inclined to say what they thought she wanted to hear, rather than their actual views. Before embarking on her fieldwork, she therefore observed the style of clothing of girls in the age group that she was researching and adapted her own style to resemble theirs. In this way, she attempted to signal a closer belonging to the students than to the teachers, a more peer-like figure, reminiscent of Mandell's (1988) 'least-adult'. However, she always answered their questions honestly and the details she shared about her own experiences in their conversations were genuine. We also wish to emphasise that the fieldwork went on for a longer period of time. Thus, even though it is not part of the data conveyed here, informed consent was given by all participants, and the researcher role and aims were explained in age-appropriate language.

### Analysing (with) sensoriality

All three of the empirical examples selected for the following analysis illustrate a shift in the relationship between researcher and participant. This shift was experienced sensorially by Justenborg as a change in the atmosphere of the room and in the flow of the conversation. It was not something that she initially had language to describe but was very present in her memories of these situations. As argued by Pink (2015), sensory aspects of fieldwork are always present and a part of the general experience that the researcher has but putting sensory aspects into academic texts is a complex and difficult task. However, from the perspective

of a sensory ethnography, sensory experiences are valuable data, as they are a response to and reflections of the situated sociocultural norms under negotiation. This approach is supported by research arguing that methodological dilemmas are not solely issues of method but can instead become points of departure for analysis (cf. O'Boyle 2018; Ringer 2013; Qvortrup 2012). The sensory framework of our analysis has two main components. The first entails extra attention to the inclusion of sensory details in the empirical examples themselves. The second is the use of these details as springboards into analysis guided by our analytical concept of recognisable emplacement, which foregrounds embodied sensory experience.

### Come with us to the canteen

The first empirical example stems from Justenborg's fieldwork in a seventh-grade classroom. This interaction takes place on her first day in the class, so the students do not know her at this point. The teacher introduces Justenborg to the class as a researcher with a focus on health and well-being and then assigns a task that the students work on independently using their computers. The room is quiet except for the occasional whisper between students, the sound of chairs scraping and fingertips tapping on keyboards. Justenborg notes that the students in the class are generally wearing clothes from designer brands, in neutral colours and styles. The group of boys in the following interaction are sitting together around the same computer and are seemingly deeply engaged in schoolwork.

*I am sitting in the back of the classroom writing observation notes during the lesson. From my position, I notice that a group of boys in front of me are looking at shoes on a website instead of doing their schoolwork. Suddenly one of the boys turns around and sees me looking at them. He flinches, opens his eyes a little wider with surprise but holds my gaze, seemingly waiting for my reaction. "I think those ones look cool", I say, while*

*leaning my body forward in my chair and smiling. He nods, looks up at the teacher in front of the class and then keeps on scrolling the website (Seventh grade, School 1).*

In this very brief interaction, an initial contact is established between Justenborg and a student in the class, which is significant for shedding light on their subsequent interactions. When one of the boys suddenly becomes aware of Justenborg's presence, he awaits her reaction. He knows of course that he is not doing what he is supposed to be doing, but as her presence is new, he seems unsure of what to expect from her. Justenborg responds with an inviting body language and a comment that signals approval of the activity. By showing an interest in the shoes and expressing her own opinion she is invoking recognition as someone not invested in whether he is following the teacher's instructions or not. Not only is she not condemning the fact that the boy and his friends drifted away from schoolwork, but she is also actively participating in the rogue activity by commenting appreciatively on a specific pair of shoes. She thereby becomes emplaced, by herself and the students, as other-than-a-teacher, which is further underlined by her physical position in the room as she sits with the students. She is negotiating a recognition of herself as open to interaction on their terms. The negotiation of the researcher-participant relationship continues in the following interaction:

*I am writing observation notes in my notebook after class and the boy from before comes over. "Wow you are writing a lot", he says sarcastically and takes a few steps back. "There are many interesting things going on here", I say a little ironically while I smile and nod. "Really? What are you writing about me?" he answers, looking at me and smiling a little while raising his eyebrows. "Are you sure you want to know?" I smile again, raising my eyebrows too. "Can I see?" He steps in a little closer and leans his body forward towards my notebook. "Yes". He takes a quick look, so quick that it would be*

*difficult to read anything. His friend comes over and I ask them what they are going to do during the break. They suggest that I go to the canteen with them. As we walk to the canteen along an empty hallway, the boys include me in their banter. Jokes fly back and forth between us, and we laugh together. The canteen is full of students standing in line or talking in smaller groups. When we come into the canteen area, I start asking them questions about what the food in the canteen is like and what their lunch habits are. The atmosphere quickly changes. The boys are not laughing or smiling anymore, and I notice that the physical distance between us increases. They reply hesitantly to my questions and look down at the floor or towards the hallway. "We have to go", one of the boys suddenly says, and they almost run back towards the classroom (Seventh grade, School 1).*

In approaching Justenborg outside of the classroom, the boy is showing interest in her notetaking while at the same time, with his sarcastic tone of voice, maintaining a distance between them. As they are talking, he also keeps changing the physical distance between them, moving in closer to say something and then taking a few steps back again. The ambivalence in his bodily expressions implies that he does not want to be recognised as invested in his interaction with her, but he is still initiating its continuation. Justenborg responds by smiling, answering tongue-in-cheek, and thereby inviting the recognition of her as fun, approachable, and relatable. When commenting on her writing, the boy immediately asks about his own presence in her notes, implying that she might have a special interest in *him*. The almost flirtatious undertones of this insinuation highlights their gendered emplacement as presumably heterosexual individuals in the negotiation of what type of interaction is possible and appropriate. The boy then asks to see her notes, and when she agrees he only symbolically glances at them. His curiosity about her notes is also part of the negotiation process – what will



she allow him to do, where are the boundaries of their interactions? Letting him look at her notes reemphasises her emplacement as a non-authoritative figure in the context, as she is not putting up boundaries and enforcing rules. As the boy and his friend invite her to walk to the canteen with them, their recognition of her seemingly reflects her emplacement as socially available and of equal status. She treats them as equals, mirroring their tone of voice and conversation style, laughing at their jokes, and replying in kind as they walk together towards the canteen, reinforcing her emplacement as a peer-like figure.

When they arrive at the crowded canteen, however, several things change, which affects their recognition of Justenborg and thus her emplacement. Justenborg starts asking questions about food and the canteen from an outsider perspective, which breaks the script of their social interaction thus far. Their shared physical surroundings have also changed. Their interaction started outside of the classroom with the rest of the class, who knew who Justenborg was. They then walked together through mostly empty corridors. The canteen, however, is crowded with their peers, to whom Justenborg is an unknown adult – probably recognised as an educator. The boys' recognition of Justenborg's emplacement therefore shifts. Their awkward and rapid escape from the situation indicates that they can no longer see value in interacting with her – she has become a social burden. The emplacement that she has had as socially available and peer-like is built on her playing along with their modes of communication, mirroring their banter and style. It does not allow for her to bring herself as a researcher into the interaction, and their relationship therefore becomes fragile. The rapport that their previous conversation had built immediately disappears when confronted with onlookers in the canteen, and she becomes a 'researcher', who through her questions proves to be less like them than they had previously recognised.

## And then your body becomes the number

The following example stems from fieldwork observations in a different seventh-grade classroom. It is again Justenborg's first meeting with the class. She arrives for an English lesson and is introduced by the teacher. The students in the class are talking over the teacher, making noise, and distracting themselves and each other during the introduction. Some are facing away from the front of the classroom, with their feet on the tables, looking at their phones and generally ignoring both Justenborg and the teacher. Justenborg experiences the atmosphere in the class as tense and unwelcoming. Her first impression is therefore that establishing relationships with students in this class will be difficult. In this empirical excerpt, she approaches a group of students after the teacher has given them an assignment to work on independently. The students are dressed in feminine clothes and are all wearing visible make up. They smell of perfume and are wearing notably shiny jewellery, rings, earrings, and necklaces.

*During a group work session, I approach a group of girls. They are talking to each other about something not school related. One girl is looking at her phone and one of the others is combing her fingers through another girl's hair. When I sit down next to them, they stop what they are doing and look at me. "This is boring", one of them says while leaning back in her chair with a tired expression on her face, crossing her arms over her chest. "I totally understand", I smile and shrug my shoulders. "I also hated English class when I was in school", I add while maintaining eye contact with her. "Why are you here?" one of the other girls asks quizzically in a demanding tone, frowning. "I would like to have your perspectives on well-being and health in school", I answer sincerely. "Fine. Then we do not have to do this [the assignment]", she says with a resigned sigh. "What do you want to know?" (Seventh grade, School 2).*

As Justenborg sits down at the table, her presence causes the group to stop their ongoing conversation. They were visibly, almost demonstratively, not paying attention during her introduction, which means that at this moment she is probably emplaced as an educator. One of the students initiates the negotiation of recognition by exclaiming that 'this' (presumably referring to the content of the coursework expected of them) is 'boring'. Her statement is an open defiance of norms surrounding 'good' student behaviour in the classroom from an institutional perspective, which would mean students accepting the teacher's authority and working on assigned tasks. The comment, together with her defiant body language, is thereby part of negotiating the student's own recognisability in this context as someone in opposition to what she recognises Justenborg's emplacement to be – a representative of the school. Justenborg experiences the comment as directed at her and as an invitation to emplace herself in relation to the girls' expressed sentiment. Instead of scolding them for not working or even encouraging them to do so, Justenborg takes the girls' sentiment even further by expressing her own dislike of the subject they are supposed to be studying. The content and style of her answer make her recognisable as an adult presence different from the teacher and allows for a subsequent informal conversation and more peer-like emplacement. The girls agree to talk to her under the auspices of getting out of doing their assignments, which is another statement that contributes to their own emplacement in opposition to institutional expectations. Justenborg recognises their way of agreeing to participate in a conversation with her as a marker of distance from her. They are making it clear that it is not because they *want* to talk about the topics introduced by Justenborg that they agree to do so – it is only because the alternative is worse. Her emplacement is thereby recognised as valuable to some extent, but still under negotiation. The following interaction takes place after their conversation in the classroom, during the break:

*I am standing with one of girls outside the classroom when two of the other girls from*

*the group walk up to us. One of them hands me a flower. "This is for you". She assumes an exaggeratedly girlish pose, crossing her legs and arms over her body, and looks down at the floor, giggling. "Wow, that's so nice of you"! I respond ironically and laugh, as do the other girls. We continue our conversation from the classroom and the girls tell me that they feel like the worst thing in the world is going to the school nurse, because you have to get on the scale and talk about your weight. I tell them that I remember having that same feeling about going there. "If you are not around the average weight, you feel like something is wrong. But what does that number even tell us?" I ask, rhetorically. The girls enthusiastically agree. "Exactly!" one of the girls says. "And then your body becomes that number" (Seventh grade, School 2).*

After their conversation during English, members of the group of girls approach Justenborg outside the classroom on their own initiative. The need to recognise Justenborg's emplacement as a way out of doing schoolwork is now gone and the physical space of the hallway is more informal than the classroom. One of the girls hand Justenborg a flower, and in doing so she is in a playful manner emplacing Justenborg as part of their group again. Justenborg recognises the flower and the parodic way in which it is handed to her as an invitation to assume an emplacement on a more peer-like premise. Justenborg is a cis-gendered woman who has herself attended school in a similar overarching cultural and normative setting as that of these girls. She thereby has embodied, gendered knowledge of the unfolding social scripts, which allows her to act in a recognisable manner. She unconsciously plays along with the joke appropriately, which strengthens her recognisable emplacement as a peer. Their previous interaction in the classroom and the commonalities that were highlighted there allow for the girls to recognise Justenborg as someone whom they can approach in this way, allowing her to be emplaced as a trustworthy and peer-like actor in this context. Their conversation circles back to her research topic

and lands on the experience of being evaluated in the school nurse's office. Justenborg relates a personal memory of school nurse visits as a way to mirror and affirm the students' narratives and find common ground, thereby encouraging their recognition of her emplacement. By participating in the conversation with her own genuine experience rather than asking pre-scripted questions, the conversational tone is maintained, which allows the interaction to proceed in a relaxed way.

Even though Justenborg's age is twice that of the students, the practices of schools have remained similar enough for her to have had comparable experiences, including having been held to related gendered body norms. Her embodied experience of the school nurse increases recognisability of similarity and familiarity between her and the students and creates the conditions for an honest and intimate conversation about her research topic. The fact that her research explicitly deals with issues related to the body and is carried out in the physical space of the school calls attention to their similarities in a way that further strengthens Justenborg's emplacement as peer-like in this context. Their commonalities are constantly re-emphasised by the content of their conversations, which makes differences between them in other social categories, like age, less present and determining of their interaction. Hence, a recognisable emplacement from a dual perspective of peer-like and researcher becomes possible.

## Researcher authority

The last empirical example illustrates a situation from a focus-group interview with four ninth-grade students. The students reached out to Justenborg because they were doing a school project about body ideals and were interested in an interview with a researcher specialised in the topic. Justenborg agreed to meet with them and subsequently asked if the students were willing to participate in a focus-group interview to discuss the preliminary findings of her PhD project. The following empirical example derives from that focus-group interview and takes place a week after their expert interview

with her. They reconvene in a meeting room at the university where Justenborg works. Justenborg notes that the students are all dressed in neutral colours. When asked during the interview, they describe their own style of clothing as 'basic'. They are polite, listen attentively, and respond willingly to all her questions. Justenborg puts out several bowls of snacks that the students never touch.

*I introduce the students to the practicalities of the interview process and finish by asking if there is anything else they would like to know before we get started. One of the students says yes and looks at me expectantly. "Well okay..." I say hesitantly, thinking about what to tell them. I suddenly feel unprepared and end up saying the first thing that pops into my head: "My name is Katrine; I work with well-being and health in schools as you know. I am married to my husband Jakob, and we have a baby boy together. Would you like to know more?" I ask with a short, uneasy laugh. "No", the same student answers, with a blank look on his face, leaning back in his chair. Silence follows. I immediately feel like I have said the wrong things because the mood in the room seems more tense. During the interview, I notice that the students repeatedly look at me as if they are awaiting my approval. They repeatedly phrase their statements as questions or finish their sentences with "...or at least that's what I think". I try to engage them by using myself and my own experiences as examples, but instead of stimulating the conversation it just leads to it fading out. I feel like attempting to create relatability makes the distance between us larger  
(Focus-group interview, ninth-grade students).*

In this excerpt from Justenborg's research notes, the point of departure for negotiating the researcher-participant relationship is a different emplacement than in the two empirical examples. The moniker 'researcher' is assumed to be initially vague and new to the students in the

previous examples, making Justenborg's recognisability thoroughly negotiable. The students in the current example, however, presumably have a good idea about the meaning of the term, due to the premise of their previous interaction – their expert interview with her. Moreover, the interview takes place in a meeting room at the university. The physical emplacement and the interview format thus work together to create a coherent emplacement of Justenborg as a researcher and authority figure in this context. As the interview is starting, Justenborg relates personal information about herself and is immediately struck by the feeling that her response does not meet the students' expectations. Justenborg's comment about her family situation furthermore counteracts her usual approach to fieldwork, to blend in and be recognised as relatable, as it highlights their different lived experiences. In the moment, she interprets her sensory experience of the room immediately following her statement as a shift in the atmosphere and creation of more tension. However, considering this experience through the lens of recognisable emplacement, her emplacement does not shift as a consequence of this exchange – rather it is emphasised. She is already speaking from an emplacement that the students recognise as fundamentally different than their own. It is her own sought-after emplacement as peer-like that is unavailable to her. As the interview continues, Justenborg's instinct still is to perform the interview as she usually does, which means that she attempts to make the interview situation less formal by actively involving herself and her own experiences in the conversation. The students do not seem to recognise these aspects of Justenborg's emplacement as relevant to their relationship, and thereby do not respond as she anticipated. The insecure and hesitant manner in which the students answer her questions can from this perspective be seen as a reflection of her recognisability as an authority. Looking young or sharing school experiences similar to theirs is not enough for them to recognise Justenborg as relatable and to allow her to assume a peer-like emplacement in this situation.

## Reflecting on a reflexive practice

Using the compound concept of 'recognisable emplacement' invites us to analyse the participants' valuations of the researcher's bodily expression and to become aware of how these valuations depend on the current environment, norms, and expectations. Drawing on this concept, we have been able to conduct an analysis that highlights an embodied knowing often dismissed as too subjective or made invisible due to the difficulty of expressing it in academic texts. In our analysis of empirical examples from Justenborg's fieldwork, we have thus made the sensed experience of interactions between her and the participants our point of departure rather than allowing them to figure as unfulfilling sidenotes. Furthermore, our collaborative approach has enabled a reflexive dialogue that has helped us see the empirical material from diverse, situated perspectives, and has also highlighted the partiality of our specific interpretations (cf. Willis & Siltanen 2009). In the following we will summarise our analysis and expand on some issues regarding responsible research practice that our approach has provoked.

In our analysis, we have exemplified how Justenborg becomes recognisable and emplaced in different ways in her interactions with students. The circumstances and details of the three situations are very different, yet Justenborg's interaction pattern follows the same script. In the first example, the quest to establish social relatability comes to overshadow her emplacement as a researcher and the clash created by trying to align a peer-like and researcher emplacement results in her emplacement as a social burden. The emplacement that Justenborg had negotiated in relation to the boys was dependent on their interaction remaining informal, jovial, and purely social, as well as on maintaining the material surroundings in which this was established. The attempt to negotiate a peer-like emplacement thus took over and made it difficult to use the social recognition she had achieved to pursue her wider research aims. In the second empirical example, the negotiation for recognition plays out differently. In this case, Justenborg is able to become recognisable

as valuable to the students in her emplacement as a researcher because it allows them to avoid tasks that they do not want to do. She becomes relatable by mirroring their affective stance towards schoolwork, grounding her recognisability in their similar sentiments towards a school subject. Still, she maintains her emplacement as researcher in their interactions, as the themes of her research and her questions are drivers for the conversation. As their interaction progresses, their recognition of Justenborg as similar and relatable is enhanced by their shared gendered experiences of the school nurse. The research topic of health and well-being allows for similarities between her and the girls to be constantly highlighted, thereby reinforcing her recognisable value to them. Although we can only speculate what a different researcher would have meant for the outcome of these specific situations, it seems like the emplacement of peer-like researcher contributes positively to the knowledge production in this situation, as Justenborg's shared embodied experiences enable her to have a relevant and genuine discussion about her research topic. Age, gender, and cultural background play together here to make her both approachable and relatable enough for the girls to abandon their initial scepticism and become engaged in the conversation. In the third example, Justenborg's recognisable emplacement as an expert has been pre-negotiated in the expert interview when the focus group begins. Justenborg then shares details of her personal life of being a wife and a mother, which serves to emphasise a very different emplacement than the students have. When Justenborg attempts to re-negotiate recognition of herself and become emplaced as more similar and relatable to the students the attempt falls flat. The fact that the focus group session takes place in Justenborg's workplace contributes to the emplacement of Justenborg as an authority. Her go-to strategy of using her own experiences to make the interview situation less formal and more relaxed therefore becomes unworkable here.

We would like to conclude by reflecting further on how our work with this article has inspired and expanded our conception of responsible

research. The first empirical example shows that there is a balance to be struck between building relatability and staying within the boundaries of a researcher emplacement. Justenborg fails to achieve this balance and the relationship with her participants suffers from it. Example three is the only example where there is a pre-existing relationship between researcher and participants within which negotiations of emplacement are initiated. Our analysis indicates that even though negotiations are ongoing, emplacements do become harder to change with time – especially when contextual cues overwhelmingly contradict the emplacement that the researcher strives for. It is therefore significant that the two first examples are from situations where Justenborg's role was still new to the participants. A quick conclusion could be that a peer-like emplacement *can* be constructive but has limitations as a general approach. Digging deeper, we might think about how we can know when our approach to building safe and constructive researcher-participant relationships is failing. A sensory ethnography allows the researcher to use the body as an instrument of knowledge production by taking its conscious and unconscious cues about the social and material environment seriously. We would therefore argue that a sensory focus is helpful in terms of evaluating the relationship approach continuously. Such a focus is especially helpful, perhaps, for early career researchers wanting to reflect on and learn about the relational dynamics in specific research situations. In relation to our future fieldwork, we are curious to explore what adapting your approach to building trust on the basis of contextual cues in an ongoing interaction might look like and how it would be received by participants.

We would furthermore like to highlight how a collective, duo-ethnographically inspired method allowed us to create a conjoint reflexive space that made a re-imagining of the empirical material possible. Actively engaging with our different emplacements as insider and outsider in relation to the empirical data as well as with our other theoretical, methodological, and social differences has added new depth to our co-authorship. Instead of

simply critiquing and attempting to align our gaze, our cooperation has implicated a truly iterative process of re-negotiating the empirical examples that created a new common foundation from which our analysis could grow. This foundation was built by constantly challenging preconceptions and assumptions in our understanding that were invisible to us both individually. As a result, our process has not only supported Justenborg, as the producer of the data, in taking responsibility. Rather it enabled a shared responsibility for the research to emerge from our mutual reflexive space.

Lastly, we acknowledge that this paper does not necessarily succeed in accommodating the critique of reflexivity as a narcissistic and self-indulgent endeavour. While our analysis unmistakably shows the influential role that participants play in the negotiation of researcher emplacement, the participants' own perspectives on the relationship are lacking. Inclusion of participants' voices is arguably especially important when working with young participants, as they are often described as vulnerable and as a group in need of specific ethical attention in research (Alderson & Morrow 2011; Graham et al. 2015). This description fails to recognise them as subjects with agency, which increases the risk of overlooking

their contributions and the many intricate ways in which they can control and gain from participation in research (Yang 2022). Skeggs (2002, 363) furthermore criticises the notion that a researcher's epistemological authority leads to an inequality of worth in researcher-participant relations as she encourages us "not to confuse positioning with morality or we become complicit in the reproduction of passive pathologies." The question then becomes: do their voices need to be incorporated more directly for research to be responsible? We have not asked them about our representation of their recognisable emplacements and we do not consider that to be a reasonable request. After all, there are limits to what they can be expected to contribute – not because they would not be able to, but because it is an abstract reflection that has little to do with their everyday lives. As argued by Bodén (2021), research *with* children is not inherently more ethical than research *on* or *about* children. Ethics, rather, are situational and multifaceted, which is also how we have come to view the practice of a responsible, feminist research. A key recognition here is that researchers do not know *more* about the participants in our studies, than they know about us – our knowledge just comes from different places.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Denmark, teacher education is managed by university colleges with strong relations to practice and leads to a 'professional bachelor' degree, in contrast to the academic bachelor degree achieved at a university.

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