



Exploring the role of emotional reflexivity in research with children



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how emotions mediate the research process. I draw upon a collaborative ethnography with children in a primary school to make a case for the practice of emotional reflexivity in research. More specifically I explore this in the context of a series of den-building research workshops I initiated with the young participants. Drawing upon a series of vignettes, I illustrate how reflecting upon and through my emotional responses to video data captured by children during these workshops gave presence to my movements through the data, thus recognising *moments* when meaning-making was entangled with prominent *memories* I had of the field and hidden *shifts* I made whilst interpreting the data. I suggest that as researchers we can use emotional reflexivity to recognise, on the one-hand, how our personal histories influence our research engagements, and on the other, how the spaces and places we inhabit as researchers shape our thoughts and feelings. I will show how emotional reflexivity offers opportunities for researchers to engage with their own relational emplacement during fieldwork and to use this awareness to develop their understandings of children's lives.

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1. Introduction

People are compelled to employ an emotionalised reflexivity in order to behave 'appropriately' in the range of types of interactions they experience. They reflect and act partly according to their perception of how they and others feel within particular interactional contexts. The complex diversity of these contexts within contemporary life puts emotional reflexivity at the heart of everyday life (Holmes, 2011: 12).

Emotional reflexivity, reflecting upon and through felt experience, is part of everyday life. Holmes (2011) argues that emotional reflexivity is an important aspect of peoples' negotiations of the complex social spaces of contemporary life. From this position, it can be argued that field researchers need to take into consideration the role of emotion during fieldwork. Through this paper I aim to build upon recent calls to acknowledge emotions in academic research (see for example Widdowfield, 2000; Moser, 2008; Punch, 2012). While this literature suggests that our emotions influence the relationships we build during fieldwork and our interpretations of the field site, missing is a more explicit exploration of how. Punch (2012) acknowledges the complexities involved in trying to do this, 'it is often not clear or easy to disentangle how the process of doing fieldwork impacts on the interpretation of our findings' (92). Rose

(1997) also suggests that we need to recognise the partiality and uncertainty of research, by 'inscrib[ing] into our research some absences and fallibilities' (319). In response this paper provides an honest account of how I perceived and interpreted extracts from video-data generated as part of a 'collaborative ethnography' (Lassiter, 2005) in a primary school setting. In doing so, I explore how our emotions mediate the research process and thus shape our research findings.

At the start of this paper I introduce the concept of emplacement and explore how this has informed a research methodology that enables my elicitation of children's socio-emotional practices. This methodology recognises my own emotional responses as epistemologically productive in the research process. I then outline the aims and objectives of the research study upon which this paper draws, which sought to explore children's experiences within a school applying the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning curriculum (SEAL). SEAL influences the ways that children are encouraged by adults to use school spaces for therapeutic effect. For example, a teacher in my research identified a library, which was adjoined to his classroom, as a space for children to visit during lesson time if he felt they needed to calm down. This study examines how children inhabit these spaces, with a focus upon their socio-emotional practices. I then provide an overview of the research strategy. I describe in detail one of the research methods – den-building. Children used this method to explore their experiences of SEAL initiatives. In addition, this method engaged with children's perceptions of the spatiality of their own and others'

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socio-emotional practices. This provides the context for the preceding sections, which reflect upon the role of emotional reflexivity during fieldwork. I describe in detail my emotional responses to video data generated during the den-building workshops and explain how emotional reflexivity improved my understanding of children's worlds. Through focussing upon three distinct clips I show how emotions were embedded in my perceptions and interpretations of the data. In doing so, I reflect upon *moments* when meaning-making was entangled with prominent *memories* I had of the field and hidden *shifts* I made towards interpreting the data. I show how this approach to emotional reflexivity supported me to acknowledge how my personal history and relational emplacement shaped my research findings. For me, recognising my emotional responses in the analysis of data also revealed new opportunities to deconstruct, and therefore develop, my understandings of the socio-emotional dimensions of children's spatial practices within the field site.

2. Emplacement, emotions and research methodologies

How can I develop a research approach that creates opportunities for the researcher to engage with the dynamic interrelationship between children's emotions and their spatialities? (Researcher's reflections, January 2011)

In recent years cross-disciplinary attention has been given to the way that people construct meaning as they inhabit and produce space and place. This work highlights embodiment (Christensen, 2003; Casey, 2001), movement (Ingold, 2007; Vergunst, 2010), emotion (Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Davidson et al., 2005), affect (Wetherell, 2012), and the senses (Pink, 2009) as integral to the way that individuals experience space and place. Ingold (2007) describes the 'inhabitant ... [as] ... one who participates from within, in the very process of the world's continual coming into being and who, in laying a trail of life, contributes to its weave and texture' (ibid, 81). This connects with Casey's description of place as an 'event' with a 'gathering power', which is 'lived' through 'the experiencing body' (as referenced in Pink, 2009: 30). For Casey, place would not exist without people to live it. The co-constitutive relationship between people and place is defined by Pink (2009) as emplacement. Pink calls for researchers to 'acknowledge their own emplacement as individuals in and as part of specific research contexts' (2009, 25) in order to engage with other people's emplaced experiences. These experiences are imbued with emotion (Davidson et al., 2005). For example, Davidson and Milligan (2004) address the interrelationship between emotion and place and argue that emotions can only be understood within a context of place, which they describe as the 'emotio-spatial hermeneutic' (524). In their view, 'meaningful senses of space emerge only via movements *between* people and places' (524, original italics). They suggest that 'an exploration of the diverse *senses* of space ... [may leave us] ... better placed to appreciate the emotionally dynamic spatiality of contemporary social life' (524, original italics). In terms of research, this suggests that emotions are also bound up in the researcher's relational emplacement within and as part of the field site. Through reflecting upon and through emotions we might better recognise how the places we inhabit through our research and the relationships we build shape our practices and, in turn, how our practices also influence the field site. For me, this awareness has potential to improve our understanding of the lives and contexts of our research participants, and in my case the emotional spatiality of children's experiences and placemaking practices.

Emotions are increasingly considered as socially constructed (Burkitt, 1997; Hochschild, 1998; Barbalet, 2001; Bendelow and

Williams, 1998) and embedded within wider power-relations (Ahmed, 2004; Boler, 1997, 1999; Wouters, 1992). Much of this literature considers how emotions 'work' within specific contexts. For example, Hochschild (2003) metaphorically describes the role of emotion within social interactions as a 'gift exchange'. She draws upon the example of 'owing gratitude' to illuminate this metaphor further. She asks 'what does it mean to owe gratitude?' and answers 'what seems to be owed is a 'sincere display'' (77). Hochschild uses the term 'feeling rules' to describe the socially constructed norms which guide how people present and exchange emotion. It is through these rules that people understand when gratitude is owed and when it isn't and how gratitude can be performed through the expression of emotion. She suggests that 'feeling rules' shape how people 'work' upon their emotions to present themselves in particular ways and change how they are feeling (2003). These rules are not only culturally specific (Barbalet, 2001), but are also situated within spatial localities. Massey (2005) suggests that general 'rules' of space do not exist. Instead she argues that in considering the politics of space, it is important to attend to 'spatialised social practices and relations, and social power' (166). I suggest that emotional reflexivity connects the researcher with the social processes through which spatialised feeling rules are sustained, contested or transformed. If we consider that the researcher's identity is shaped through fieldwork (Coffey, 1999) then an awareness of how this happens could deepen the researcher's understanding of the field site. Emotional reflexivity can support us to be aware of how we adapt the ways we manage and express emotion in and as part of a particular research context. I believe it is integral to a research methodology which aims to better understand children's socio-emotional practices. Engaging with my own emotional experiences helped me to develop an understanding of how spatialised feeling rules were produced through the movements between children and place.

Emotional reflexivity brings the researcher closer to understanding how spatialised feeling rules are socially produced as it facilitates her/his appreciation of the relatedness of people's emotional lives. This idea relates to conceptual understandings of emotions as intersubjective and experienced in relationship with others (Pile, 1991; Bondi, 2005). Within this work emotions are viewed as 'located' in both bodies and places and constructed through the 'relationality' between people (Davidson et al., 2005). For example, Bondi (2005) states that 'what we experience as our own emotional life' can give us insight into the flow of emotion between bodies, minds, spaces and places (442). She suggests that through psychotherapeutic supervision, she re-encounters the emotional geographies that bind her relationships with clients during psychotherapy. Through engaging with her own felt experiences it is possible for her to explore the circulation of emotion between her and her clients, or what she describes as the 'betweenness of emotion' (443). Concepts of counter-transference within the field of psychotherapy also consider how engaging with the emotional responses of the therapist and client can facilitate both parties to develop a contextualised understanding of the relationship between them. Counter-transference considers how emotional responses are situated within an intersubjective context. As Pile (1991) states, from a counter-transference perspective, 'intersubjectivity ... is the terrain on which problems between the analyst and the patient play themselves out ... And this is no longer assumed to occur in isolation from wider social relationships; but fundamentally constituted within them' (462). He suggests that researchers can draw upon this understanding to build research relationships through which both researchers and research participants 'try to come to an understanding of what is taking place around them' (459). For me, engaging with my emotional responses brought about new insights not only into the relationships I had

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