INTERTWINED JOURNEYS OF A PHD STUDENT AND UNACCOMPANIED MINORS: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF RESEARCH WITH VULNERABLE PARTICIPANTS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The aim of this article is to discuss a PhD student's experience of working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, amidst a rapidly changing global situation. The focus is on how the research process influenced the novice PhD student, and how the student's subject position influenced the research.
Background	The incentive for this article comes from an examiner's comment, which argued that the student's thesis did not clarify her subject position, or allow her voice to be heard. Paulo Freire's (2005) concept of "pedagogical love" is used in unpacking these dimensions.
Methodology	The paper adopts an autoethnographic approach. The data, consisting of 48 pages of field notes written during the doctoral study, are analyzed abductively (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), in dialogue with theory.
Contribution	The paper brings to the fore the ways in which the doctoral research processes may influence students, especially those working closely and intensively with participants in emotionally challenging situations and within a research field in flux. This knowledge is rarely included in doctoral training, but is relevant in today's world where migration and refugees have become a popular theme. Secondly, the paper contributes to the already well-established body of literature about how doctoral student's positionality influences the research.
Findings	The article utilises the ideas of storytelling (Weir & Clarke, 2018) and communicates findings in the form of three intertwined journeys: that of the author through her PhD process; the journey of her research participants from their countries of origin to Finland; and the journey of the PhD research within the historical turbulence of 2015 in global refugee situation. The findings show that acknowledging and reflecting one's own emotional stance is required for the

	wellbeing of the student, as well as for an ethical research process resulting in a trustworthy outcome. The findings also suggest that although the love-rhetoric may sit awkwardly within our current academic perspectives, a focus on emotions does not diminish rigor in research. Instead, it enables ethical relationships and processes that are meaningful for all participants.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The paper recommends that practitioners in academia (including doctoral supervisors) encourage doctoral students to "know with [their] entire body, with feelings, with passion and also with reason" (Freire 1997, p. 30), and to reflect on their positionality, as well as map their doctoral journeys in the intersection of others.
Recommendation for Researchers	The paper highlights that researchers working with people in challenging situations must continuously question their biases, show interest in the research participants as individuals, and create trust through long involvement in the research field.
Impact on Society	By highlighting the complexities encountered in this research project, the paper aims to disrupt the simplistic, often deficit-focused assumptions about people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.
Future Research	The scope of the findings leaves open a discussion on critical moments during the shared journeys: how to enter the research field ethically, and how to exit after creating trust and building relationships?
Keywords	autoethnography, Finland, PAR, pedagogical love, unaccompanied minors

INTRODUCTION

The positionality of the doctoral researcher, especially its influence on the research *outcome,* has received plenty of scholarly attention (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017; Roegman, Knight, Taylor, & Watson, 2016; Vanner, 2015). However, the emotional side of the process, particularly when working with people in challenging situations, remains inadequately understood in research literature (a good exception being Nutov & Hazzan, 2011).

This article takes an autoethnographic look at my doctoral research with 12 unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls in Finland (Kaukko, 2015). The original study, upon which this article draws, was a participatory action research (PAR), aiming to understand children's participation during the asylum process. The focus of the doctoral research was on the unaccompanied girls and their experiences, (Kaukko, 2015) whereas this article focuses on me as a PhD student. In this article, I elaborate my doctoral research process, focusing on the importance of reflecting on the emotional side of engaging in research with vulnerable groups of people, such as children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

The incentive for this article comes from an examiner comment on my thesis. This examiner, a great scholar and a strong feminist, was satisfied with the quality of my thesis but noted that there was one element missing. "Given the feminist stance of the candidate, it would have been appropriate for her to be explicit about her subject location as researcher. Where is the voice of the author?" she asked. My first reaction was resistance. Surely, my voice was there, loud and clear. The purpose of my research was to get to know the lives of twelve, extraordinary girls, waiting for their asylum decision in Finland. Needless to say, during two intense six-month field work periods, all the girls affected me, and my subject location, deeply. Furthermore, it is imprinted in the used method, PAR, that the research process is reflective and subjective, allowing the researcher's voice to be heard (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

However, I soon realised the reviewer's question was justified. While I referred to my positionality and background, I did it merely in a descriptive manner and primarily in the discussion section of my thesis. I felt that description was the best I could do within the quite traditional guidelines and strict word limits of a doctoral thesis. Also, my thesis was not about me, but about more interesting people.

Writing about me was not a priority, but as much as any other part of a rigorous research report, it would have benefitted from an analytical approach. Where you sit determines what you see (Westoby, 2009, p. 13), yet this is not emphasized enough in doctoral studies, or in texts supporting doctoral students or supervisors. However, this is not a novel thought. St Augustine (354–430AD) has famously said a long time ago:

> People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains; at the huge waves of the seas; at the long course of the rivers; at the vast compass of the ocean; at the circular motion of the stars; and yet they pass by themselves without wondering.

This article is my attempt to wonder. It draws on an autoethnographic analysis (Vine, Clark, Richards, & Weir, 2018) of my field notes (48 pages), shedding light on the ways in which working with a vulnerable groups of participants (such as asylum seeking children) influenced me as a novice PhD student, and how this can be reflected within (or outside) the thesis guidelines. My aim is to encourage doctoral students and educators, especially in fields such as refugee studies, to consider how the research impacts the student, and vice versa. I encourage doctoral students to "know with [their] entire body, with feelings, with passion and also with reason" (Freire, 1997, p. 30), and communicate their findings bravely. These considerations are rarely included in doctoral training, but are relevant in today's world where migration and refugees have become a popular theme.

I start by briefly outlining my doctoral study, as well as its context, followed by the theoretical and methodological foundations of analysing the process retrospectively. Theory has an abductive role in this process, which means that I acknowledge existing theories (such as Paulo Freire's ideas of pedagogical love), but rather than 'testing' or 'validating' theories deductively, I intertwine them with the data in a dialogic manner (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Finally, I discuss my findings in the form of three journeys: my own PhD journey, the journeys of the participants in my PhD, and the journey of my doctoral research in the middle of the rapidly changing global situation.

ORIGINAL STUDY

To put my autoethnography in context, it is necessary to start with an overview of the original study, from which my experiences draw. I conducted my doctoral research with 12 unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls, between the ages of 8 and 17, who were all waiting for their asylum decision in an underage unit of a reception centre, in North Finland. The girls had come from Somalia, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo without their parents or other guardians. The aim of my doctoral study was to understand children's participation during the asylum process, and to explore the ways in which the girls' participation and wellbeing could be promoted. The findings of my doctoral study, which are discussed more extensively elsewhere (Kaukko, 2015, 2016), showed that meaningful participation reflected the girls' fluid positions in relation to their gender, age and status as asylum seekers, and it meant both the right to voice opinions and the possibility to choose silence, as well as the opportunity to include 'ordinary things' into their lives.

My fieldwork consisted of two rounds of PAR, lasting five to six months each, during which I met the girls in their home (the underage unit) once a week, a couple of hours a time, planning a project based on their wishes. The outcome with both groups of girls was a three day camp outside their home town, consisting of child-led or child-initiated activities ranging from horseback riding to make up workshops, and cake baking. Field work spreading over a long period of time was necessary to allow me to get to know the research participants, and the participants to start trusting me. Prolonged engagement enabled us to plan and implement a project which started from the girls' needs,

rather than from my research interests. The progress can be read in my field notes. Early entries report my insecurity of working with this group of girls, as well as my interpretation of the girls' hesitation to work with me. An entry after five months of collaboration with the first group shows increasing trust:

> Now the girls come and sit next to me on the couch. They, especially [the younger ones] hold my hand, tell me private things, and ask for help. We have certainly come a long way. (Field notes, 14/11/2011).

The main sources of knowledge in the original study were individual and group interviews with the participating girls, conducted with the help of an interpreter. These interviews gave me insights into the girls' experiences of participation during their asylum process. The field notes, which documented my thoughts during the process, have not been used as a main source of data before this article. As Kelley (2014) notes, autoethnographic analysis works best when applied after some time of reflection, which is why I chose to revisit my field notes to reflect this process now, two years after finishing my thesis.

METHODOLOGY

The roots of autoethnography as a research method have been drawn to the work of anthropologists such as Heider (1975) and Goldschmidt (1977), who were among the first to surface the researchers' personal beliefs and perspectives in ethnographic research. In essence, autoethnography is "anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it" (Strathern, 1987, p. 17). The description of autoethnography as a strand in the mainstream ethnographic canon utilising the ideas of storytelling (Weir & Clarke, 2018; Boje, 2008) is illustrative of my approach to the method.

The story for this article consists of field notes, which I analysed with autoethnographic steps: seeking to describe and systemically analyse (*graph*), a personal experience (*auto*), in order to understand a cultural or social experience (*ethno*) in an understandable way. The personal experience in focus is mine as a PhD student, and the social experience is when my path as a PhD student intertwined with those of the girls, and how we co-created the journey as we did.

Like all qualitative research methods, but perhaps even more than most, autoethnography has been criticised for lacking rigor, theory and analytical components (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It has been claimed that autoethnography overlooks standard research ethics (Ellis, 2001) and often focuses on people who already have power and privilege (Becker, 1967), thus reproducing unequal power structures in societies. Some critics go even further, blaming autoethnography for being "essentially lazy, literally lazy and intellectually lazy" (Delamont, 2007, p. 2) work of researchers, who are "self-absorbed, full of emotion, and lacking understanding about what constitutes research (Kelley, 2014, p. 348).

Considering the arguments above, it is no wonder that autoethnography has not become mainstream or very popular, especially among PhD students, who have enough work to do justifying their research with more traditional methods. On the other hand, autoethnography can be a way of avoiding the trap of what is sometimes called "boring" qualitative research (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 959, Caulley, 2008). It has been justified by arguing that if autoethnography is done sufficiently analytically to give the work academic credibility, and being honest and sticking with the facts, it can be acceptable in academia (Anderson, 2006).

While my analysis was primarily data-driven, it was influenced by my long-standing interest in Paulo Freire's work (Kaukko, 2015). Especially Freire's texts about pedagogical love, and their interpretations by thinkers such as Antonia Darder (2014, 2017) and Michalinos Zembylas (2017), resonated with my views. However, rather than testing or validating theories, I approached them abductively: reasoning through the phenomenon in focus (my doctoral research process), considering its parallels to other observations (the findings of my original research) and existing theories (pedagogical love),

resulting in an inferential creative process of producing new knowledge (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, 171). In what follows, I present my key findings, as well as their connection with the guiding literature, in the form of three, intertwined journeys. I intentionally blur the lines between storytelling and research to bring these three journeys alive.

THE JOURNEY OF THE UNACCOMPANIED GIRLS

I start with the journey of the girls who participated in my study. The girls had left from Somalia, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, without their parents or other caregivers, or had lost them during the flight.

The youngest of the girls was 8 years old. I will call her Ladan, which is not her real name. Ladan did not make the decision to get on the journey alone, and when she was leaving, she did not know where she was going.

Ladan, like the other girls, had been sent on the journey because her family was in danger. Her family had no choice but to send her away, although there was no certainty of safety, and the possibility of ever seeing her again was small. Another girl, Sagal, described her feelings at the moment of departure in this way:

> *Of course, I did not want to leave, I had to leave. Otherwise they* (referring to the Al-Shabaab terrorist organisation) *would have caught me, taken me and killed my family. My mother said that I should go to some place where I do not need to marry anyone.*

I walked into these girls' lives trying to understand children's participation, unprepared to hear these stories. In almost all the cases, the girls' parents had to say, "we love you enough to send you away to somewhere we don't know and have not been, so that you can be safe. But it may mean that we never meet again" (Kohli, 2014, p. 88). My aim, as an inexperienced PhD student and as a mother of young children, to do research with them promoting *children's participation*, started to appear a bit irrelevant. If promoting children's participation is understood as increasing children's possibilities to be involved in a "process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (Hart, 1992, p. 5), it may appear odd from the perspective of children who have *had* to make many decisions which are too difficult for children of their age, and who have had to be responsible for their own survival and travel to the other side of the world.

On the other hand, it was easy to assume that the girls' journeys would have made them multiply vulnerable and pose overlapping challenges for their participation and wellbeing. Their assumed vulnerability was strengthened by the fact that they were children, seeking asylum without their families, and in this study, they were in the margin of a margin as they were girls.

There is broad agreement in migration research as much as in education and psychology that children's "markers", such as their ethnicity, gender, disability, nationality, refugee status or the fact that they have no parents, should not be understood in essentialist terms (Fox & Jones, 2013; Orgocka, 2012; Utas, 2004). However, the practices and processes around unaccompanied children have a way of essentialising them. Looking back, I know that I as a researcher did that. I had assumptions on where our research would proceed, and on the aims I thought the girls would have for it. I knew better than to assume a role of a noble researcher "empowering" "marginalised" groups (Ellsworth, 1989), but I had assumptions, and I could not help feeling sorry for the girls.

Although the circumstances make the girls in my study definitely vulnerable, and even though it is self-evident that a person in a vulnerable position needs to be protected, the perspective of a victim does not necessarily take into account how the children themselves see their position. The girls in my PhD had also made their journeys. They had fled, survived their journey and made it to safety. At the same time, their journeys had made them: they had learnt skills that children and young people at their age seldom have. They had been successful in changing the directions of their lives, and they did not see themselves as victims.

Walking along the girls taught me that seeing only the difficult situation, and not the child, is not the whole picture. That part of the picture overlooks the girls' individual strengths. Using the words of Chimamanda Adichie, discourses such as these flatten the many experiences, good and bad, that have made these children.

> The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story (Adichie, 2009)

The biggest danger of these single stories is not that I as a researcher would start believing them, but that the child herself starts believing in them. They might start believing that they are not only in need of protection, which they of course are, but also that they are missing knowledge of what is best for them and, above all, missing an ability to act and influence on their own lives.

I doubt that anybody would like to reproduce these kinds of single stories on purpose. However, some of the things we do are so implicit that we do not even notice them. For example, thinking or implying that childhood is a period of joy and play and everybody should experience it such, can easily exclude children whose experiences do not fit into this picture. According to the girls in my study, their extraordinary experiences did not take away the fact that they were quite ordinary girls with ordinary joys, sorrows and dreams. They did not think that being a refugee would have stolen their childhood or made them victims of the adult world, but they wanted to manage in their everyday lives as well and normally as possible.

The very early career researcher in me initially thought there would be so much to write about in terms of the problems these children face, and I knew I would probably find many readers for those kinds of texts. However, the other side of me, perhaps the mother-side, was happy to hear and amplify the positive stories. Revisiting my field notes reminds me of my process of balancing between the personal and transformative potential of love (Zembylas, 2017). I was moved by the stories on a personal level and inclined to keep my emotions private, as researchers often do. On the other hand, I knew that by making my emotions public when communicating the needs of asylum-seeking children, I could touch not only the minds but also the hearts of the listeners, and contribute to a change.

Realising that my emotions are not separate from the research was a significant signpost in my PhD path. This insight leads to the next journey of this article, my own journey as a researcher with these girls. I start with the more personal side of my story, because it is closely related to the troubles of this deficit-centered discourse.

THE JOURNEY OF A PHD-STUDENT

My eldest daughter was seven and eight during my fieldwork. She is now eleven. My girl came to play with Ladan sometimes. She was understandably amazed at hearing that someone of her age should leave her home alone and end up on the other side of the globe. I could not help thinking how in a few years, my daughter would be Sagal's age, the same age as some girls needing to choose between a forced marriage or fleeing the country.

Being a parent and doing a PhD is not uncommon, and definitely not impossible. I come from Finland, which is claimed to be the "world champion" in gender equality in general (Julkunen, 2010) and especially in academia (Husu, 2001). Although practically manageable, being a mother of four young children made some of the emotional bumps almost unmanageable, and some biases difficult to break.

Being a parent made me want to shut my eyes from the backgrounds for the girls' situations. When learning about children within forced migration, understanding the girls' current living circumstances, uncertain situations and the impossibility of a family reunion in Finland (Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016), I wanted to adopt them all. Wanting to save the world is a typical problem for PhD students. It is not

exclusive for mothers, nor do I argue that I would be more attuned to these hardships than anybody else working in this field. Yet of all the challenges connected to the PhD process, the problem of ensuring ethical relationship in this situation was the hardest, and the one I got least preparation for in my studies.

Being a teacher made me reflect on our encounters in relation to theories on children's learning, attachment, development, and growing. As noted above, one of the ideas that resonated with our process was Paulo Freire's (2005, 1997) concept of pedagogical love. Although Freire's texts have been criticized (Elias, 1976; Weiler, 2002) for being outdated, male-centered and only relevant in the context where they were written, and some of his ideas sit awkwardly into the current world, many of his messages still have validity.

Freire did not specifically define pedagogical love, but he used the words of bravery, courage, faith, hope, humility, patience, respect, and trust throughout his writing to refer to an ethical way of working with multidimensional human beings, such as girls who are not only asylum-seekers or unaccompanied, but in many ways just like any other girls. In this view, love is not seen as a feminized, "soft", or sentimental topic of a private sphere (Darder, 2014). Instead, it is a set of intentional and conscious practices aiming for social justice. (Zembylas, 2017, p. 30). In my research, pedagogical love meant that I understood the girls' strengths and courage for doing what they had done, and seeing that my role was not to "rescue", "free", or "cure" someone in a vulnerable position. The idea of pedagogical love maintains that education and growth, as well as research with people, do involve the hope for something better, but achieving it requires consideration of another person as an individual capable for contributing to change (Darder, 2014; Freire, 1997).

Thus, love is not limited to a person. It is transformative and emancipatory practice that moves beyond the individual to a collective project (Zembylas, 2017, p. 30). Furthermore, pedagogical love is not limited to the classroom, but it rather offers a living pedagogy that can be infused into all aspects of our lives, including research. Love does not diminish rigor in research but instead, allows the researchers to "know with [their] entire body, with feelings, with passion and also with reason" (Freire, 1997, p. 30).

Pedagogical love, combined with the nature of research with people, made me see the participants as children, and acknowledge my subject position, as a teacher, as a Finnish woman and as a mother. I learned that is not only acceptable but also required to describe and analyze the process, and communicate the findings widely. The professional side of my journey intertwined with this finding, especially as I, like all doctoral students, had to defend the quality of my research for people who did not see eye to eye on all the things with me.

However, doctoral students are often advised to keep their emotions (or themselves) outside of the process (Lichtman, 2010), even if this "objectivity" would be merely fictional (Breuer, Mruck, & Roth, 2002, p. 1). My personal and prolonged engagement with the research participants made my thesis subject to at least four kinds of criticism. The most common criticism was that our shared journey influenced the girls' responses, and thus, the credibility of what they told me. The girls' stories varied depending on what they thought they wanted me to hear, and I for my part interpreted their stories based on my own premises. The girls showed creativity in adapting the role of a girl or young woman they had learnt earlier to what they imagined the expectations in Finland to be. For instance, the girls told me what they believed children need to learn and do in Finnish society. All this sounded like a student talking to a Finnish teacher, clearly reflecting what the girls thought I, as well as their case workers, and surely also their asylum case investigators, wanted to hear. They also told me that women should work, but they can still have children, like I and many of the case workers demonstrated with our examples. Thus, it can be argued that the girls wanted me to hear the simple and "thin stories" (Kohli, 2009) which they considered beneficial for themselves, and which would not jeopardize their trustworthiness or claims for asylum.

The second criticism, which I had overlooked before writing this article, was about how the journey influenced me. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1973) has said that an action researcher's own personality and involvement prevent her from participating in a theoretical discussion on her topic. Research such as mine involves too much emotion, even pathos, but very little objective, generalisable knowledge, because I cannot observe the process objectively. Many PhD students, especially from traditional institutions and educational systems, may aim for neutral, impersonal, and objective research (Atkinson, 1997; Delamont, 2009). There is nothing wrong with this stance, but the criticism rooted in this tradition sometimes fails to acknowledge the value of other kinds of paradigms.

The hope for something better, the commitment to act, and the aspiration for a meaningful change are crucial in PAR, which was the method of my original study (see, for example, Kemmis et al., 2014), as well as for anyone who is inspired by the ideas of Freire (1995, 2000). There are also arguments in (problem-centred) refugee studies, maintaining that research with asylum seekers, refugees, and other people in the most vulnerable situations is ethical only if the research focuses on their trouble, distress and suffering, trying to find a solution for them. The rationale is that concentration on the more trivial issues shows that the researcher is shutting the eyes to true misery (Turton, 1996, p. 96).

Based on some interpretations of the above-mentioned ideas, the knowledge about things which the girls wanted to focus on is trivial. Likewise, my balancing between the *participatory*, *action* and *research*-aspects of my PAR leaned too much towards the action. Emphasizing action can be claimed to sacrifice the rigor, or even worse, result in a research project which is fun! However, this was what the girls chose to focus on; the fun parts were the most tangible outcome of our project for them. Our focus on minor nitty gritty of the everyday, instead of the distress and misery due to the girls' refugee experience, can be interpreted as meaning that my PhD does not aim at a major change nor does it take a stand.

Finally, the fourth major kind of criticism came from feminist scholars who agreed that our journeys were, after all, too far from each other. Although as was noted in the examiner comment, I situate my research within a feminist framework, I had trouble justifying whether I, as an outsider, can produce trustworthy knowledge of a situation that I cannot fully understand. How can I acknowledge the power relations in the asylum-seeking process and the uncertainty caused by it, as well as the individuality and flexibility of the girls, while avoiding generalisation, but still arriving at a trustworthy conclusion? Similarly, this article as analytical autoethnography can be criticised: my journey along with the girls, not as a full member of the research group studied, gives only partial knowledge on what occurred (Lake, 2015).

All of this criticism is justified; this is how science is evaluated. As all doctoral students should know, when research is carried out from a certain point of view, it needs to be criticised from another. What made me survive this criticism, and what I suggest students do, is to justify all the choices. I defended my work by arguing that I used my judgement in separating the "thin stories" from the "thick stories" when talking to the girls (Kohli, 2009), and that I acknowledged how the research process and my engagement in the field changed me, and influenced my capabilities (and willingness) to be "objective". I have chosen to continue to be involved in projects which balance between practical outcomes and rigor (Kaukko, Lahti, & Nummenmaa, 2017), but I have found ways to justify it methodologically as well as ethically (Kaukko, Dunwoodie, & Riggs, 2017). Finally, I have accepted my inevitable position as a "guest from the outside" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008) when working with refugee and asylum seeking children, and learned to work as well as I can from this position.

Before elaborating how surpassing these bumps can inform other doctoral students, I will turn on the third and final journey. This journey took my research into unanticipated directions.

THE JOURNEY OF A PHD THESIS WITHIN THE GLOBAL "REFUGEE CRISIS"

The final journey is that of my PhD research amidst societal changes and the recent, so called "refugee crisis" of 2015 (which I, among for example Meer and Sime [2015], view as a global crisis of humanity rather than a crisis of refugees). Unaccompanied asylum seekers have come to Finland at an even pace for a long time, less than 200 per year. The numbers of unaccompanied children, especially girls, have been so low that it was another cause of criticism against me: a study conducted on such a small and constantly diminishing group is hardly very important from a social point of view.

I found enough girls to carry out my project with two groups of girls who were living in the unit at different times. I would have done one more round with a third group, but there were no girls coming – and not many boys, either.

I sent my thesis for a pre-examination in June 2015. At about the same time, record numbers of asylum seekers, children and adults, began to enter Finland (Finnish Immigration Services, 2018). I got my thesis back in August, only to find out that the most up to date numbers I had reported in my thesis had increased fivefold in three months. When I publicly defended the thesis in November 2015, the number of unaccompanied children in Finland waiting for an asylum decision was reaching the record by being ten times more than the previous year. The group in focus was no longer marginal in society, but very visible.

So there I was, defending my thesis and claiming it was timely and accurate, when suddenly everything had changed. The world, which the girls' stories represent, disappeared before the thesis was published, and although the numbers have since declined, the time with very few unaccompanied minors is not likely to return. It was criticism I did not anticipate, and criticism which all research methodology books fail to answer.

The problem of keeping up with changes applies to all PhD research. Research fields change, people change, and people's needs change. Policies and practices change, and what is considered good for people or the world changes. We as early career researchers change as our conditions change, but the fact that we have to keep up with everything does not change. I felt like I had to learn the roots for this sudden change in a refugee situation, and be able to predict the future. I now know it was a too high an expectation, as even the best migration researchers struggled with this challenge. This final challenge, encountered just before the completion, made me question my choice of researching a field which is by definition in flux.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I wrote a thesis in which pretty much everything went wrong. It was too emotional, too subjective, too objective, and definitely outdated when it was published. I would like to end this article by sharing some insights into how such a problematic study passed with high distinction, and how this could help current and future PhD researchers as well as their supervisors. I was not the first PhD student struggling with the challenges discussed in this article, and neither are your or your students' problems unique. Reading widely and deeply helps in realising this.

I argued then, and I maintain now, that my focus on small everyday matters does not mean that I was shutting my eyes to the major world crises. Focusing on cheerful everyday issues was what the girls hoped for, and therefore something self-evident in this child-centered study.

I argued that the girls' "thin" stories, which might not have revealed everything because of lack of trust or fear, started to get complicated, confused, and thick, and it was this messiness that brought the research part into our interaction. Rather than describing what the girls did and said, I learned to know them well enough to understand why they acted and spoke as they did. This took time, which may have appeared unproductive from a PhD perspective, but was crucial.

I also argued that the created knowledge was true in the time and place in which our study was conducted, and that is all anyone working with human beings can do. Being critical to positivist social science, that is all I want to do. I am not alone in questioning what counts as rigorous, high quality, scientific research, and in thinking that the ways in which the "facts" and "truths" scientist "find" are inevitably tied to the vocabularies and paradigms they use (Kuhn, 1962). If future researchers want to replicate my PhD study, they will not find sufficient detail or generalizable results from this text. They need to create the bonds, get to know the participants, and find out what works.

My doctoral research journey did not make me more objective, or more neutral about research. Instead, it made me believe that emotions and pedagogical love are needed, perhaps even necessary, in research where people rather than objects are being studied. This article is my attempt to conceptualize it. Looking back on my own journey in an analytic way, I see that this emotional labor developed me as a researcher and an educator in ways that even the best research methodology courses never could.

I also had to justify that I finished the research, without learning everything about the new situation, before conducting another round of action with a new group of girls, and before changing the world dramatically into a better place. Putting a stop to the process was the final, significant challenge. According to some action researchers, such as Finnish Hannu Heikkinen and colleagues (2006, p. 29), cycles in action research do not have an end, but the improved practice or more functional context is always only temporary, waiting for a new cycle of action to improve it even more. This is, of course, true, but this advice carries a risk of misinterpretation for eager doctoral students. I had to argue that this action research project had an end not only due to the fact that everything changed, or that the girls moved away, or because I would have thought I reached some ultimate truth. This action research project ended because I had to finish my thesis; my other engagement with refugee and asylum-seeking children have continued (Kaukko et al., 2017; Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2018).

My perhaps biggest insight was the one that made me want to continue in this field. My process taught me that research can be fun. Fun is required for research that is ethical and reciprocal. I think some level of fun is also required to keep the PhD candidate sane. PhD takes a too long time to spend on a topic the researcher is less than passionate about. To my supervisor's horror, I used the word "fun" in my public defense, justifying my method. Luckily, my opponent understood. "Fun is a serious commitment," he said. To find out what is fun, I had to put aside my preconceptions about asylum seekers and acknowledge that the girls' life situation did not determine them as individuals, or define what they wanted to focus on in our shared research project. I could not learn that by doing research without engagement and love.

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