

I thought there was a river behind my house

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“(…) the mind of the Self and the minds of Others are interdependent in and through sense-making and sense-creating of social realities, in interpretations of their past, experiencing the present and imaging the future”

(Marková, 2016, p. 1)

Citation Link

I can still recall the smell of my classroom. Sitting there, in the middle of a gigantic room, with people throwing papers and pencils over me. Me, I, Anna, maybe 10 years old. 7. 13. The room had a smell of wet shoes and liver pate. The classroom was too big. Too small. Too loud and too quiet. Too warm and too cold. And in line with even more texts, instructions and expectations I turned my school-brain off, flew away to the pattern in the ceiling. To my room back home. A TV-show, and that I hoped that we should have rice for dinner. Because sitting there, trying to take in all the shit I heard, made my mind itch. Gave me an urge to stand up, take my backpack and go. With strict and certain movements. But I didn't. Not at all. I sat there. Smiled when it was expected. Nodded. Packed my stuff together and was polite when the teacher said goodbye, see you tomorrow.

Ok, it wasn't all that black and white. But I can recall that feeling. And I still feel it from time to time. When I try to help my kids with their homework. School brain off. In parental meetings. Off. The way some classrooms are furnished today. I snore. Itch. Yet sitting there, having some kind of resistance bubbling somewhere inside of me.

What is life, indeed, if not a proliferation of loose ends!

It can only be carried on in a world that is not fully joined up, not fully articulated. Thus the very continuity of life its sustainability, in current jargon – depends on the fact that nothing ever quite fits.

(Ingold, 2013, p. 132)

Autoethnography. I am intrigued by how it is described as “the epistemology of insideness”, and how autoethnography can give us knowledge about a phenomenon or an experience; that an “outsider” couldn’t have given (Adams et al., 2015). Interesting perspective, since my Ph.D. project is about outsideness. Or: people we categorize as outsiders. As dropouts. NEETs. Not. In. Education. Employment. Training. People who we only describe as something they *are not in*, instead of what they are in.

“Social life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If our desire is to research social life, then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion”

(Adams et al., 2015, p. 9)

Someone / me: Why have you chosen to use 4 years of your life to study outsideness?

Me / someone: I have thousands of reasons.

Someone / me: Ok...? Could you name one?

Me / someone: ...no.

Maybe because there is no reason. No single reason. When I turn myself in one direction, and answer *Because there is not so much research done from the standpoint of those we categorize as outsiders*, I lose all the other reasons. I could answer that I study outsideness because I don’t like the school system. But I have been a teacher for my whole work-life, and I love being in the classroom.

And when I say that the aim of this project is to give a voice to those who haven’t necessarily got an established voice in academia, I’m making a border between them and us. Us in academia. Us, the insiders, looking at them, the outsiders. And I don’t necessarily feel like an insider. Do I?

Like sitting in the classroom. Sensing a paper note is being thrown over me. Infront of me. Behind me. Through me. Small text notes going past me with information about something I am not a part of.

Teacher: Yes, Anna is positive and has many friends in class.

Parent: That’s nice to hear.

I thought there was a river behind my house. But now that I’m standing here, 20 years later, it looks more like a swamp to me. If I put my best foot forward, I can understand that I saw a stream back then, but a river, never. What was I thinking? And the hill up from the garage wasn’t a hill at all, more like a gentle slope.

And now the need arises. To straighten up my position. Clear my throat. Explain. Connect all my loose ends into a greater understanding, checking that you have understood it the way I want it to be understood. To understand the meaning of this text. To understand, understands, understood, have reached a conclusion. Final. Period. Question mark. ?

“Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those needs of those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was or will be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough”

(Arendt, 2018, pp. 175-176)

Glimpsing at my nails the second before I knock on the office door. I should have taken that nail polish off, what was I thinking, so typical me. Too late, I can't undo it. I hear a voice; he is in there. Please enter, he says. Please enter, sit down he says, the man in the black office chair. It looks extremely ergonomic. The way he is rolling around behind his desk looks poetic in some kind of way.

Yes, poetic. Like they are one. Connected. In communication. United. He uses one hand to show me my white, plastic chair, and the other one is trying to type something on his computer. I sit down. He says sorry, that he needs to finish up something. Just give me one minute, he says while fading himself out from us and in to the computer. I curl my fingers. I guess he thinks that I am unhygienic. Plastic folders and ring binders. “Body and trauma”. “Individual Plan”. Ah, sorry, he says, me and this computer are not friends today. He is laughing with only his shoulders. Or, not only shoulders. Small, rhythmic bursts of air are forced out of his nose. I put one foot on top of the other. I guess he has got a lot of hair in those nostrils.

Click, click, done. So. He turns around. Thank you so much for your patience. And for such a quick response on my mail. Your PhD project is so important, and we are really looking forward to learn from your presentation. Do you have a PowerPoint?

A proliferation of loose ends....

Anna? Why did you drop out of the university in 2001? And in 2002? In 2003? And 2004? You, who began every autumn with clean sheets, books, plans, goals, and around November or December, you dropped out, quitted, faded yourself out. You, who had all the resources to do it well in school, didn't you? A good home, married parents, dogs, cats, clean clothes, always positive, ok grades, friends. Sang in a choir and played football, too. Well-functioning, not many risk factors, good presentation skills. Why did you drop out? You, of all?

Why did you finish your teacher's degree? You, out of all? You, who dropped out from everything you started on. Every year. You are obviously not a student-type or an academic person. Someone who gives up when the going gets tough.

“Narratives select episodes of life and mark them in time: before, after, again and so on. These episodes are then rearranged, not necessarily in historical order, but to tell the most coherent story about what life felt like”

(Stern, 2004, p. 6)

I'm fed up with all these questions. The why's. The what's. The how's. Like there is an answer to everything. How was school? What did you do? What if the answer differs, depending on where I am, who I am together with, if I am hungry or what the room smells like. I hate questions. Ok, that's not true at all.

"Perhaps, we can find ways of doing research that is more about looking for cracks—without smoothing them out; showing contradictions—rather than covering them up; increasing complexities—rather than unifying. The fallacies of the narrativizing and interpretative machinery of qualitative research call for strategies to examine what does not fit in and what does not make sense. This becomes a kind of research that stays with contradictions, stays with unresolvedness, and refrains from bringing into order"

(Bøe et al., 2021, p. 12).

I'm holding your hand. Your warm, little, exited hand, waiting for your name to be read out loud. Your hair. I feel like its just ten minutes ago since you were put on my chest for the first time. Time stood still back then. You, and me. Us. Like there were no tomorrow, no today and no yesterday. You, with that blonde hair, bald on the top and all this hair in the back of your neck. And now you are standing here, with hair wax, new backpack, new sharpened pencils in a Lego Ninjago pencil case.

You are holding my hand. I, me. Me who are about to let you go. They read out your name. You are going up to the principal alone. Both hands on the straps of your backpack. "Welcome", he says. He is welcoming you. I am proud. Afraid. Angry. Happy. And many more things that can't be described. We made it this far. You and me. Through early mornings before kindergarten. Playing, running, laughing and crying.

You broke one of my ribs when you lived in my womb. You ran around in there, just like you are running around in our living room now. All of me wants to keep you there, running around, being you, and all of me wants to let you go. Let you go into

1. Learning outcomes.
2. Meta cognition.
3. Self-regulation.
4. Citizenship.
5. Smiley faces when you manage to sit still on your chair.
6. Fuck this shit I'm out.

Or am I? I am standing there. Applauding when all the pupils in this new class are standing there, side by side. I take pictures, turn over to my husband, leaning into him. "Look at him", he says. Look how proud he looks, holding his sheet of paper. Yes, I say, and I mean it. 10, 13, maybe 16 or maybe 18 years of school in front of him. He, the one who lived inside of me just a second ago.

Autoethnography is called the epistemology of insideness (Adams et al., 2015). Or? Should autoethnography also be called the epistemology of outsideness? Or the epistemology of smoothing out the lines between insideness and outsideness, inviting us in beyond these binaries?

I can still recall a smell from my classroom. Sitting there, in what who felt like in the middle of a gigantic room, with people throwing papers to me. Me, I, Anna, maybe 10 years old. 7. 13. It smelled of my teacher's fabric softener. Warm cotton. Like when mum hung the bed linen to dry in spring breeze. And the smell of a xylophone in some old strange woodwork. We had to share. Xylophones, triangles, maracas and some other strange stuff that could make this clapping sound. And in line of all this chaos, I turned my school brain on. I sat there. Being able to hit that xylophone as hard as I wanted. "My BUNNY is OVER the OCEAN. My BBBBUNNY is OVERRR the SEEEEEA!" My teacher smiled. I smiled. Goodbye, see you tomorrow!

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