

“She was writing down notes more furiously than ever before.” The dynamics of play and jokes during fieldwork with expatriate youth in Finland

Dr. Mari Korpela

Academy research fellow

Tampere University, Finland

Visiting professor

Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester, UK

Expatriate childhood: Children's experiences of temporary migration (2019-2024, Academy of Finland)



8-15-year-old expatriate children in Finland

- position in Finland and on the global arena
- belonging
- everyday lives in Finland



Fieldwork

- Fieldwork with 9-year-olds 2019-2020
(9 months)
- Fieldwork with 14-year-olds 2021-2022
(8 months)
- participant observation
- children's interviews
- drawings, photos & film



Humor in everyday life in a lower secondary school

Teachers and students

teachers ≈ stand-up comedians

Among students

forced togetherness (Wise 2016)

identity work

boundaries

spontaneous, immediate, intimate

Jokes and playfulness are an integral part of everyday life in the school: school is fun!



Joking relations

a hierarchical “relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195).

Negotiating the fieldwork role:

downplaying the hierarchy

not a teacher but a Finnish speaking adult with a PhD

Earning the “**licence to joke**” takes time → long-term fieldwork



Using humor to downplay my role and background

Successful jokes

University education

Age

Nationality



Unsuccessful jokes

Taking the blame

Naive blond woman

Being nosy



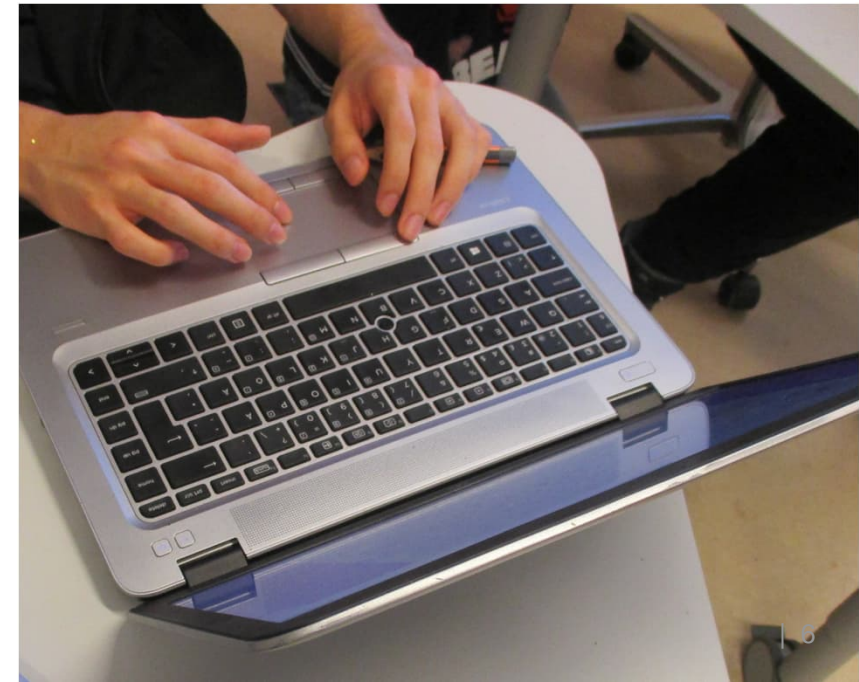
Anthropologist on the field

“Kill Mari. She is the evil in the field. Get rid of the adult. Get rid of the university professor”.
(during a game on a PE lesson)

“Mari single handedly keeps the Finnish lumber industry alive.”
(a comment on fieldwork notes)

“You are a spy who was sent to collect DNA samples from a diverse class and create super-humans.”

“You helped me in the Finnish and in the band, so I'd say it's a pretty good trade... for a spy.”



Insider

“She was writing down notes more furiously than ever before.”

“Mari, you can do it.”

(some PE lessons out of my comfort zone)

Accepting my own vulnerabilities by utilizing humor

Improvising with playfulness

fieldwork was very intense;
I had to keep up with the jokes
and playfulness



The dynamics of play and jokes during fieldwork

- Both the youth and I used humor to negotiate my role during the fieldwork
- Playfulness and comedy were integral parts of the teenagers' life of "forced togetherness" in school
- Everyday life with teenagers is intense, fun, absurd and spontaneous
 - Witty jokes and quick responses
 - Smart and thoughtful comments, not just silly nonsense → should not be ignored



Trickster anthropology? How to express the playfulness in academic “products”?

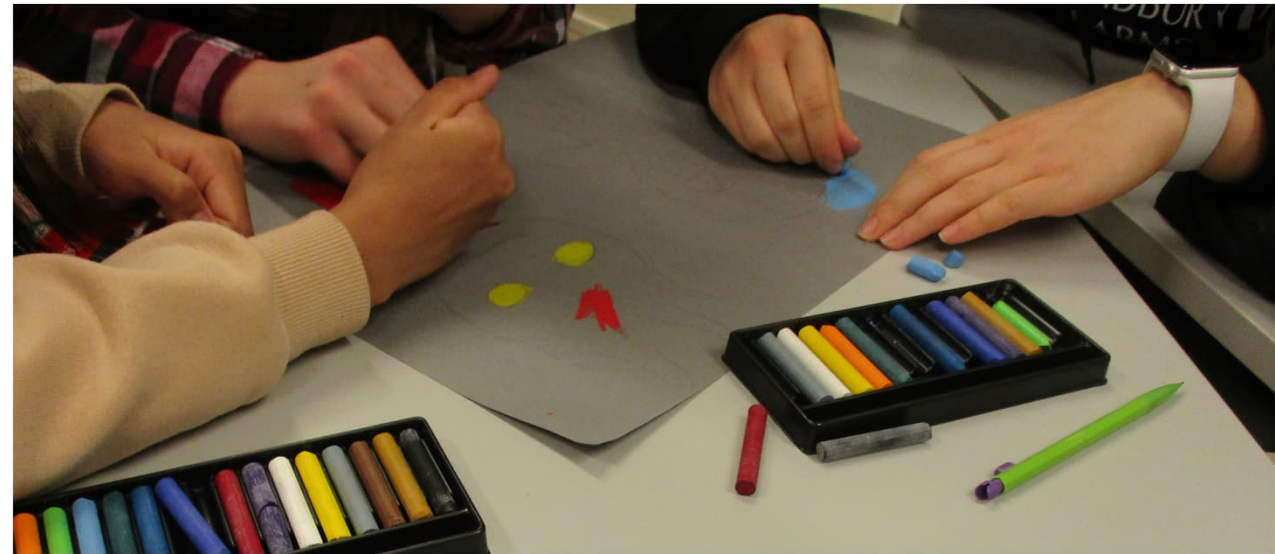
Context matters with humor: “you had to be there”

The quickness, spontaneity and absurdity of humor and playfulness are hard (or impossible?) to express in a written form

Analysis and theoretical frameworks tend to flatten the playful empirical realities: is it fair to the participants and to our work?

My film became a comedy

But the film provides only an **edited** glimpse of the youth’s **freetime** and fails to capture the spontaneous playfulness of everyday life in school



Trickster anthropology may find inspiration from research among children and youth