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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Agency, power and emotions: ethnographic note-taking in research with children

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## ABSTRACT

Ethnographic note-taking in the field is often imbued with emotions, shaped by power relations and influenced by participants' voice and agency. Though enough has been written about ethnography, discussions on the specific challenges of taking notes, particularly in research with children are limited. Drawing on three ethnographic field studies with children in schools in the UK, India and China, this article discusses fieldwork experiences to understand the challenges, dilemmas and complexities around note-taking in the field. Using a reflexive and intersectional lens, this article discusses the role of agency, power and emotions in the experiences of taking notes in child-centred research with children. It conceptualizes the need to understand the complexities when theories are operationalized in real-life research contexts.

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## Introduction

Taking ethnographic fieldnotes is a rigorous process and requires care and attention from researchers. Geertz uses 'thick descriptions' (1973) to reiterate the importance of writing extensively about the events observed in the research field. Such 'thick' fieldnotes are important, as they allow researchers to access the rich, personal, somewhat unfinished data (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil 2018). However, the process of taking fieldnotes is shaped by many factors, such as participants' agency, researcher–participant power relation, and emotions experienced by researchers and participants in the field. Although agency, power and emotions are commonly discussed themes in current research with children and young people (Punch 2002, Dixon 2011, Blaisdell *et al.* 2021), these themes are more often used to unpack issues around ethics, researcher bias and researcher–participant relationships (Atkinson 2019). There is limited discussion about how agency, power and emotions shape researchers' experiences of recording data, particularly note-taking in child-centred ethnographic fieldwork. Using a reflexive and intersectional lens to revisit our experiences of research with school-aged children in three different contexts (the UK, India and China), this article discusses experiences, particularly challenges of taking ethnographic fieldnotes in child-centred ethnographic research with children, which were emotionally imbued, shaped by power relationships between the researchers and the others, and guided by children's voices and agency.

The concept of childhood as relational encourages researchers to engage children in research as active stakeholders (Spyrou 2019), whose voices should be recognized from the conception of ideas

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to the dissemination of research (Tisdall 2012). Child-centred research requires careful consideration from researchers that children's rights as stakeholder and active participants are being respected throughout the process of research. In doing so, researchers are often troubled by the linear and standardized methodological and ethical protocols. Drawing on Russell and Barley (2020)'s work, this paper reflects on the authors' continuous attempts to find a balance in ways that were least disruptive to the research itself and were not impeded with power asymmetry and emotions. The article draws on research with children from indigenous, ethnic minority and low socio-income communities, whose voices in mainstream research have largely been under-represented. By making connections between power, voice and agency with note-taking, the researchers through reflexivity and creativity begin to make an attempt to address injustices in the research processes, thus further helping re-imagine research practices through the lens of social justice.

This article begins with a discussion about the importance of fieldnotes in child-centred ethnography, followed by a review of the conceptual discussions on agency, power and emotion in relation to research with children. We then unpack how agency, power and emotions emerge and shape our experiences of notetaking in three child-centred ethnographic studies. We discuss challenges experienced whilst respecting children's views in research along with adhering to the methodological and ethical protocols of research set by adults in the academic world.

## Taking fieldnotes in ethnographic research

Fieldnotes in ethnographic research are descriptive, detailed and compiled with as much care and consciousness as possible (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), as they help paint a vivid picture of the context, the participants and their everyday events. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 142, emphasis in original) state that '*what to write down, how to write it down, and when to write it down*' are the questions researchers need to ask themselves when producing ethnographic fieldnotes. According to Spradley (2016, p. 78), ethnographic fieldnotes include: space (physical place/s); actor (people involved); activity (a set of related acts people do); object (the physical things that are present); act (single actions that people do); event (a set of related activities that people carry out); time (the sequencing that takes place over time); goal (the things people are trying to accomplish); feelings (the emotions felt and expressed). Spradley's (2016) definition provides a list that suggests that ethnographic fieldnotes should provide detailed, holistic and subjective descriptions of the observed episodes. Apart from being descriptive, another aspect of the ethnographic fieldnotes is being – 'reflexive and analytical' (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, p. 971), where the researcher reflects on feelings and learnings from the field through theoretical, practical and ethical perspectives. The 'reflexive and analytical' aspects of the fieldnotes are of significance as the process of data collection and data analysis cannot be separated in ethnography. It is particularly significant, as ethnography is 'a double process of textual production and reproduction' (Atkinson 1992, p. 5), where the ongoing reflection and analysis of fieldnotes enable the ethnographers to collect and analyse data simultaneously (Emerson *et al.* 2011). In this case, fieldnotes are not only a research strategy to capture what the researchers feel, observe, listen to and think but also to make explicit their reflexivity process of researching in the field (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil 2018). In the literature on ethnography, a great deal of attention has been paid to issues such as writing the ethnographic research report (Amit 2000, Emerson 2001, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, Kahn 2011). However, as fieldnotes are considered private documents, unfinished and personal, the transition from notes to research findings and reports remains unexplored (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil 2018). Ethnographic fieldnotes have received less consideration as a methodological issue, and in areas that allow exploration of researchers' epistemological, ontological and ethical positionalities (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil 2018). This discussion is even more limited in research with children. Therefore, through this article, we attempt to make the 'invisible work' (Emerson *et al.* 2011) visible, exploring the journey of taking notes in ethnographic research with children through the axis of agency, voice, power and emotions.

## Agency

Agency is a key concept in the new social studies of childhood (James and James 2008). In the contemporary sociological understanding, it is being recognized as relational (Holloway *et al.* 2019) rather than as an individual's capacity to perform (Robson *et al.* 2007). With a theoretical shift towards relational thinking, it has now been argued that children's agency cannot be explored as a child's individual feature. However, the concept of agency still remains less examined (Mizen and Ofusu-Kusi 2013); for example, 'what is less clear in the existing definitions is the degree of agency, the impact of that agency and the nature of that agency' (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, p. 242). This recent flurry of debates has highlighted the lack of a theoretical underpinning for the concept of agency in studies related to children (Eßer 2016, Oswell 2016, Spyrou 2018). In this article, we don't delve into the debates around the origin of agency; and understand it as relational and interdependent (Abebe 2019), situated in a context and on a continuum (Fuchs 2001). This further suggests that agency is enabled (or not) through networks and alliances with other actors, including other children, adults, environment, spaces and objects (Christensen and Mikkelsen 2011). We find agency useful with a particular focus on the researchers and the research processes which were negotiated while recording fieldnotes. Another concept that is closely related to children's agency and is important in ethnographic research is children's voices. The question of listening to children's voices and paying attention is imbued with power (Spyrou 2018). Voices can also be shaped by established ideas about the participants (Mazzei 2009, Spyrou 2011). Considering agency as a complex phenomenon, helps us challenge the simplistic notion of children's voice (Lee 2008), by defining it as ambiguous, complex and constructed in nature (Prout 2005, Lee and Motzkau 2011, Hohti and Karlsson 2014). Aligning with these views, we take a critical, reflexive approach to children's voices, arguing that research needs to consider the context and power imbalances that shape these voices (Spyrou 2011).

## Power

Power is defined as a complex phenomenon (Foucault 1982) when looking into children's lives in institutionalized settings. Children in schools or other institutions are generally perceived as a subordinate group (Dixon 2011) under the supervision or authority of adults such as parents, teachers or other adults. The conception of children as the least powerful poses challenges for children's agency in the research process. Therefore, power in child-centred ethnographic research should be perceived as fluid (Mayeza 2017) allowing researchers as well as children to constantly re-negotiate their roles. Christensen (2004, p. 166) further suggests making research dialogic to allow opportunities for the children as well as the researchers to negotiate power imbalances. Making research dialogic creates possibilities for researchers to continuously reflect on research strategies to align these with the expectations of the researched community. Martin (2011) proposes to adopt the least adult role to eliminate the adult-child categorization. The least adult role helps researchers present themselves as friends or members of the children's community (Christensen 2004) and develop close relationships with children to understand meanings that children attribute to events related to their lives. Acknowledging the benefits and adopting the least adult role in research with children, we explore the challenges faced when children have opportunities to resist against the mechanisms introduced by dominant adults in institutional settings.

## Emotions

Emotions are 'always interwoven in power relations, both shaping and being shaped by them' (Burkitt 2014, p. 150). Emotions are increasingly appreciated by scholars, in both research and political agenda, of working with children and young people. They are being taken into consideration for children's right to protection and participation, and as a methodological dimension in

participation studies, particularly from the perspectives of child–adult relations and ethics (Blaisdell *et al.* 2021). Emotion as a concept has varied definitions in different disciplines. One of the most relevant debates is around the emotions’ complex nature when defining them from individualized, collective and public lenses. In this article, we follow Burkitt’s (2014) conceptual discussions about emotions, believing that individualized theorizations of emotions should be extended to place emotions in broader social relations and contexts. Burkitt (2014) also argues that emotions help people form embodied and mindful senses of different aspects of their relationships with others and the world. This relational definition of emotions ‘draws attention to how emotions are connected to the wider patterning of social relations including histories, memories, our habits and perceptions of self, others and the world’ (Blaisdell *et al.* 2021). In recent studies with children, especially the ones using participatory methods, such as ethnography, an increasing number of scholars have included emotions as one of the lenses to conduct methodological reflexivity due to the close connection between emotions and relationships in data collection, analysis and presentation (Pinkney 2011, Davies 2015).

## The research contexts

Ambika Kapoor’s research in India was conducted with 6 key participants (6–12 years old) in an indigenous community, in a village in Chhattisgarh over a period of 7 months between January to July 2018. The aim was to understand children’s experiences with hardships and risks and their agency in an indigenous community. The various elements of children’s daily lives and experiences were captured through ethnographic research using – participant observation, informal conversations and visual methods including photographs and drawings. The interactions with children took place in the school, homes, neighbourhood and fields.

Samyia Ambreen’s research in the UK was conducted with 27 children (9–10 years old) in a primary classroom (Year 5) of a mainstream school from Sep 2013 to July 2014. Using an ethnographic research design – participants observations, informal conversational interviews, focus group interviews and art-based activities were used to understand children’s interaction with their peers and explore children’s perceptions of ability-based group work. Before the data collection phase, the researcher worked with the same children as a support teacher to build rapport with the children and the school community (Nov 2012 to June 2013).

Yan Zhu’s research in China was conducted in a primary boarding school with 49 children (11–13 years), in Year 5 children for a period of 5 months between February to July 2016. The aim was to understand their diverse understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school. To immerse in children’s everyday school life, the author stayed in the school accommodation during fieldwork, participating in children’s day and night routines. The data was collected through ethnographic observations, informal conversations and interviews. Secondary resources including textbooks and schoolwork were also used as a rich source of data.

In the following sections, through illustrations from the ethnographic field research in three different contexts – India, China and the UK, we examine the role of agency, power and emotions in influencing and navigating the processes of note-taking in research with children.

## Delicately balancing note-taking with children’s voice and agency

The new social studies of childhood recognize children as active agents and social actors (James *et al.* 1998) in their own lives. Thus the field has been concerned with issues around children’s agency and voice. There have been studies that empirically explore these through concepts such as ‘negotiated interdependencies’ (Punch 2001, 2002), materiality (Bacon 2012) generationing (Alanen and Mayall 2001), spatiality (Holloway and Valentine 2000) and resourcefulness (Katz 2004, Dyson 2008 and Abebe 2007). This knowledge provides perspectives for a nuanced understanding of children’s agency while recognizing them as active participants in their lives. However, we still find limitations

in work that discusses how this voice and agency is enabled through the process of research, particularly taking notes in the field and how the researcher navigates this terrain, striking a delicate balance between their agency and voice viz-a-viz the research ethics.

Fieldnotes are the first step in ethnographic writing (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil 2018). As ethnographers working with children, we were aware of the importance of fieldnotes in our respective field sites. We remained conscious about the choice of stories and instances we focused on as well as how our writing choices to take note of these stories (Emerson *et al.* 2011) would influence the readers' understanding of the children's lives in the particular context. Although the concept of children as active agents is not new but its implementation in educational settings is often impacted due to structural hierarchy where children usually get placed at the bottom (Dixon 2011). Further our research groups comprised young children, indigenous communities and ethnic minorities – who have traditionally been marginalized in research and in the society in general.

To preserve the accuracy and details of the events in the field, notes are usually recorded in the form of scribbles of action and dialogue during the fieldwork. Emerson *et al.* (2011) referred to these as jottings through which researchers keep a record of the significant events in the form of keywords or phrases whilst being in the field. All of us, in our respective research sites, observed children's curiosity around these notes. They were interested to see what information was being written about them and their peers. The following excerpt is from Samyia's fieldnotes sharing a similar experience:

*It was the start of the day. After discussing with the class teacher which group to work with, I took my dairy with me to their table. Today, Isma and Baber were talking about Math's worksheets they were working on together for the numeracy lesson. Babar and Isma disagreed on the remainder for one sum, Isma arguing it was 4 and Baber saying it should be 3. Their conversation ended in an argument when Babar refused to listen to Isma saying 'I know its 3 and I am right'. I started jotting some words to remind myself about the nature of their interaction. Isma was keen for me to take note and added 'Did you note what Babar just said'. Later, in the afternoon, Isma asked if she could read what I had written about their interaction in the morning. I was undecided as I had added more details with my reflective notes in the same dairy soon after the lesson. Upon refusing, Isma accused me saying 'you are not from our group as you should be telling us everything'. I was quiet as the science lesson was about to start but was thinking about Isma's request and how to respond. I was confused about what to share and how to share in a manner that Baber's responses remained confidential. As Isma was unhappy with me declining her request, a few days later, I covered Baber's responses with my hand and shared the notes with her. I explained that I am unable to share the rest to respect Baber's choice to remain anonymous in the study. [Samyia's fieldnotes, 21 October 2013]*

This situation led Samyia to come up with different solutions to fulfil children's request about sharing fieldnotes. Sometimes, simply explaining that all notes in the diary could not be shared to respect the privacy of the students and wish to remain anonymous in the research. When this did not convince the children, and they continued insisting, she hid some parts of the page with her hand or paper ensuring that children could only read information about themselves.

In Ambika's field site, the curiosity was also due to the language being used to record their activities, as the researcher sometimes used English, a script the children were not very familiar with. This was different from what is experienced in ethnographic research with adults. For example, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) experienced suspicion from their adult participants, or Heimer and Thgersen (2006) whose participants assumed the researcher was hired by higher authorities.

Children as social agents have a 'range of strategies and tactics that enable them to resist hegemonic practices established both by adults and other children' (Skelton 2009, p. 1437). Their interactions with the researcher including – acceptance to participate in research, refusing and rejecting to engage, challenging the researcher are forms of children's agency that have been explored. Further, children's curiosity in the research notes can also be seen as children's expression of agency. This made it difficult to keep notebooks private in the field (Thorne 1993) and we all experienced dilemmas in the form of constant struggles to decide what and how much to share with the children. This led to exploring creative ways in navigating ethically sensitive situations (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Managing children's expectations about accessing fieldnotes was a way of ensuring children's active involvement in research. We also attempted to balance power by respecting and addressing



their curiosity about fieldnotes. However, managing children's expectations in creative ways along with adhering to the research ethics was challenging despite maintaining reflexivity.

Along with agency, children's voice is an important aspect in research with children which has an impact on how researchers take notes in the field. Recently researchers have called for new kinds of reflexivity in relation to researching children's voices (Komulainen 2007, Spyrou 2011, p. 162) keeping in mind the context and power asymmetry. The need to attend to children and childhood from a social justice perspective adds a moral imperative to this agenda (Spyrou 2011). We discuss this through an example from Ambika's field site in India:

*In the village, there were two indigenous communities, the Oraon and the Korwas. The Oraons in the village were comparatively more educated and better in terms of their socio-economic status. The Korwas were deemed as a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) under the Indian constitution.*

*One day in school, a fight broke out between some children and two groups were formed, with the supporters being divided based on their ethnicity. One of the girls from the more marginalised community remarked - 'they (referring to the other group) always bully us', this othering was based on their ethnic identity.*

*As one group was more marginalised and felt discriminated against, they felt that the reason they were treated that way was because they were Korwas. Further the teachers' perception added to this as they often made comparisons between the two groups based on their ethnic identity, referring to the more marginalised group as dirty and less educated. [Ambika's fieldnotes, 11 April 2018]*

As a researcher, Ambika worked with the awareness that some groups are underrepresented (Kapoor 2020). Therefore, was even more careful while noting the version of the more marginalized group to ensure that everyday injustices were not being repeated in the process of research. These experiences help explore the connections between power and research through a lens of social justice. This further helps think of the relationship between 'knowledge and power, between research and emancipation and between lived reality and imposed ideals about the Other' (Smith 2012, p. 165). It was a continuous process of decision making around what should be recorded, keeping central the knowledge and voices of the groups traditionally marginalized.

At a given time being surrounded by many children, and listening to multiple voices, it is not always easy to pay attention and remember what all to write (Kapoor 2020). Fieldnotes are not straightforward accounts, there are choices and dilemmas the researchers face in the field, as they are surrounded and affected by diverse stimuli (Hernández-Hernández and Sancho-Gil 2018). Through the continued decision making about what to write, when to write and how to write in the fieldnotes, we addressed the question of – whose voices were being paid attention to? whose knowledge was being prioritized? This reflexivity helped to move the field's agenda further, which is concerned with listening to children's voices and children's agency.

## Managing power asymmetry through fieldnotes

To adjust the power asymmetry in child-led ethnographic research, many adult researchers work with techniques such as being an 'unusual adult' (Christensen 2004) and working with the idea of honorary child (Atkinson 2019). Being careful of the power privileges associated with traditional adult roles in educational and other social institutions, researchers avoided authoritarian rules regulated by adults such as 'setting the rules of a game, telling children off, solving conflicts among the children or protecting and looking after them' (Christensen 2004, p. 174). Since in school settings, children are generally perceived as a subordinate group (Dixon 2011) under the supervision or authority of adults, we all recognized how this perception of children, posed challenges to engage children in notetaking while recognizing their status as active agents (Morgan 2002).

We attempted to blur the adult–child dichotomy with taking the least adult role and acknowledging children's status as stakeholders to ensure their active engagement in the information recording processes during the fieldwork. Yan in a Chinese boarding school observed that an 'unusual adult' role encouraged children to engage in conversations and behaviours that would otherwise



be regarded as inappropriate and at times not permitted by the teachers. For example, in the authors' fieldwork about children's friendships, it was observed that fewer boundaries and a high level of openness (e.g. sharing secrets and exchanging diaries) are often used to display the closeness between friends (Zhu 2020). As the researchers build a rapport with the participants, at times some children may refer to this positive relationship with the researcher as 'friendship'. Subsequently, children tend to have the same expectations from adult researchers as that from a friend. In our research, we all observed that children asked to read our fieldnotes. Though based on children's experiences with the school rules and guidelines, children might have different perceptions and reactions around their names being included in fieldnotes. In the following excerpt, Yan observes children's anxiety about being mentioned in the researcher's fieldnotes:

*[...] Today Cai and Qian looked at my field notebook together. Since it was just jotted notes (my writing was unclear and I only recorded a few key words), Cai was not sure of the context of the text. She looked anxious and worried and came to ask me why her name was recorded. But was relieved after my explanation and added 'I thought I did something wrong!'. Her anxiety could be linked with students' performance recording strategies in the school – where student leaders record their fellow students' misbehaviours in their notebook and report to the teachers. It was possible that children were making an association between: 'name being recorded' with 'doing something wrong' or 'being criticised and punished by teachers' [...]* [Yan's fieldnotes, 20 April 2016]

Due to the school management mechanism – where students' misbehaviour was recorded and used as evidence for criticism (Zhu 2021) – children in Yan's field held negative perceptions around names being 'recorded' in the fieldnotes. Furthermore, she also observed that children were more sensitive, anxious or even panicked when they read fieldnotes of a certain nature, such as the ones related to interactions with the opposite sex. This was due to specific socio-cultural norms, such as 'early love' in school and notions of romance in childhood being considered inappropriate and unacceptable in China (Zhu *et al.* 2022). Therefore, in some cases, she had to refuse children's requests to view detailed notes. Such refusals made some children unhappy, further making the author guilty and anxious, due to the concern that this could potentially impact their relationship with the children.

Both the researcher and children negotiated roles and expectations in their changing relationships. The negotiations however were not always dependent on what roles the researchers and children were willing to perform to balance power relations. School routines and power structures embedded in the school culture impacted negotiations between adult research and child participants. For instance, adopting a least adult role, Ambreen (2017) noted:

*It is not always in your control to let children exercise agency and act as active stakeholders in research. After finishing the afternoon outdoor Physical Education (PE) lesson in the school playground I was taking care of the girls changing in the cloakroom whilst the boys were changing in the classroom with the class teacher. Girls in the cloakroom were chatting with one another, seeing and commenting on each other's' stuff, bodies and body movements. There was a lot of giggles and laughter. They were involving me in their chats, and I was happy to join and respond to their questions. The room did not seem noisy to me as I saw it as a space where the girls and I were engaging in shared conversations. The Year 6 teaching assistant came to the cloakroom and stopped the girls from talking as the other were studying. She added you should not laugh as 'an adult is standing next to you, and you should show some respect'. [Samyia's Fieldnotes, 12 May 2014]*

Samyia did not stop the children from talking loudly and giggling but the children were reprimanded by a member of the staff and asked to keep their volumes low as a sign of respect to the researcher, who is an 'adult' in their school. The teachers' remarks compromised children's status as active agents. This incident impacted the bond being developed between the researcher and the children, as they became confused and suspicious of the researcher's role as an unusual adult. In this case, she delayed taking fieldnotes over the next couple of days to re-work on building trust with the children.

As researchers doing ethnographic research in a school, we often felt we had to make decisions in the field to maintain a relationship with the participants, which at times required forgoing the process of taking fieldnotes. For example, Samyia presented herself as a helper to support children's group work while observing their interactions. She changed roles from an outsider to a member of

the group (Mayeza 2017) that resulted in a loss of opportunity to record children's peer interactions while they were engaged in the classroom activity.

In schools, the researchers were expected to absorb the popular culture of the school (Wyness 2006) to preserve their identities as participants and members of the researched community (Emerson *et al.* 2011). In one such example, Samyia had to forgo her interest in further exploring children's gendered interactions (Mehta and Strough 2009), as elaborated in the excerpt below:

*Gender in the class was one of the deciding factors for children's cooperation (or not) to work with the same or opposite sex peers. One child Isma mentioned her mother instructing her not to work with boys as it was not permissible in their religion (Islam). As a researcher, I was interested and wished to explore this further through conversations with other children. The class teacher felt it could be sensitive to discuss faith in the classroom so advised me to not have these conversations. Soon after, one day, I was standing at the bus stop after finishing the school day. As I had finished late that day, I met with a group of children going to the mosque. During this informal encounter, children talked about seating arrangements for boys and girls in the faith lessons which provided insights on gender-biased interaction in the classroom. [Samyia's Fieldnotes, 11 December 2013]*

Samyia could not have conversations with children in the school setting to understand the role of faith in perpetuating gender segregation (Halstead 1991) as these discussions were regularized or silenced by the school culture. Though, her shared ethnic and religious identity (Pakistani Muslim) with children from the school, helped the researcher facilitate these discussions with children outside the school at a nearby bus stop after school hours. However, these could not inform the research data as she did not have ethical approval for having conversations with children after school.

The examples discussed in this section provide an understanding of the possibilities and pressures that researchers experience while negotiating power relations with children whilst taking notes, particularly in a school setting. Understanding these also leads to the realization that this process is full of complexities (Mayeza 2017). The conceptualization of power as fluid (Foucault 1982) allows the researchers to be flexible while engaging with children alongside taking notes about their lives in an educational setting. Along with capturing children's activities, it allows them to explore the details of 'how' and 'why' such events took place from the perspective of children in child-centred ethnography (Russell and Barley 2020)

## Navigating emotional landscapes of taking notes in the field

Ethnography, as an immersive data collection method, is emotionally charged because of the close relationships and interactions between the researchers and the participants (Beatty 2010). Researchers need to continuously deal with the 'mutability, fluidity, and multiplicity of feelings' (Bondi 2005, p. 235) in the process of observing and listening to the participants' emotional life experiences. In recent years, an *emotional turn* in the research agenda has increasingly indicated the importance of recognizing the role played by emotions in the process of research with children (Blaisdell *et al.* 2021). To understand the impact of emotions on research, emotional reflexivity is a commonly used strategy that supports researchers to interpret enacted emotions between themselves and the involved others (Holmes 2015). Such intersubjective reflections help researchers explore 'how unconscious processes, such as emotional responses, structure the relationships between researcher and participants' (Blaisdell 2015, p. 85). A successful analysis of emotions could contribute to the quality of the research. For example, reflecting on emotions could help researchers understand the meanings they and the participants attribute to their actions (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017). An honest, detailed and often messy recording of the dynamic emotions is fundamental to writing a holistic description. However, since both researchers and participants have their pre-existing life experiences and memories (Blazek 2021), when conducting narrative-based ethnographic writings (e.g. fieldnotes and reflexive research diary), various factors could challenge this process of data recording. Thus, a discussion of emotions is important, due to its significant impact on data recording, interpretation, and presentation.

When doing research, given the socio-cultural norms and expectations within academia, the researchers need to ‘manage how they feel and to undertake emotion work, within the context of specific “emotional regimes”’ (Bondi 2005, p. 232). They need to prepare themselves to stick to certain ‘feeling rules’ (Bondi 2005, p. 102) to manage their emotions, to establish trust with the participants and to encourage them to talk about their lives and experiences (Gillies and Robinson 2010). However, since adult researchers are also feeling human beings, emotions experienced by them could also shape the process of data collection and writing (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017). For instance, in the field, researchers are often ‘unprepared for the emotional torrent’, such as ‘unregulated and uncontrollable feelings’ among participants (Gillies and Robinson 2010, p. 102) and strong emotions associated with highly sensitive issues (Pinkney 2011). As experienced by us, in our fieldwork with children, children’s negative emotions (e.g. anger and aggression), languages (e.g. verbal languages such as ‘I do not like you’, ‘go away’, ‘you are so annoying’, and body languages such as pursed lips, squint and clenched jaw) and behaviours (e.g. flap, shout, scream) were commonly noticed across all stages of the fieldwork. These negative emotions from children in interactions were often upsetting and caused likely barriers between the children and the researcher. Ambika discusses a similar experience in the following excerpt:

*Towards the end of the fieldwork during peak summers, as I would visit and try to talk to the children, sometimes they would escape or not talk. One day as I walked towards Reema’s house, she saw me and ran away. I was confused. Later in the day when I met Mani, she said I don’t feel like talking. As a researcher I felt rejected. She clarified that these days it was too hot, so we are tired and don’t feel like talking. [Ambika’s Fieldnotes, 11 June 2018]*

Although these specific negative emotions and behaviours were recorded with great detail in the fieldwork, the researchers had to be mindful of not recording these events with a negative overtone. In research with children, children’s negative emotions toward adult researchers are always highlighted and problematized in researchers’ fieldnotes. This is normally interpreted as children’s resistance to adult power and the researcher’s failed attempt at building a positive relationship with child participants (Blazek 2021). He argues that children’s negative emotions, towards adult researchers, could display more than just the individual relationship between them. The researchers need to respect children as emotional agents and situate their emotions in the wider biographical and socio-emotional entanglements of their everyday lives. However, in practice, children’s negative emotions could easily upset researchers and push them away. Consequently, as children’s negative emotions do not conform with the mainstream expectations of the harmonious relationship between child participants and adult researchers in research, it might get simplified as an expression of not wanting to participate, which may marginalize some children in research (Blazek 2021). Through reflections, for example, Yan observed that children, who were always positive and friendly in interactions towards the researcher, featured more prominently in the fieldnotes, compared to those who seemed disinterested or portrayed negative emotions.

The researcher’s strong emotions might not always come from present observations and experiences. The observations and interactions in the field might trigger memory of similar experiences in their childhood, leading to stronger emotions. Therefore, in research with children, one of the challenges is the blurred boundary between children’s lives as observed in the field and the researchers’ own childhood experiences. Such a challenge is more prominent in contexts of educational institutions, which could trigger memories of similar experiences in their childhoods (Thorne 1993). Flashbacks of their own childhood experiences could influence the process of taking notes. For example, during Yan’s fieldwork, bullying and conflicts between the children triggered memories of similar experiences from childhood. On one particular day, she emotionally recorded a conversation with a few girls:

*[...] I talked with Duan, Wenjun, and Xiaoyue about their friend Taozi during the break. These girls often said ‘Taozi is bossy’ and mentioned negative consequences when Taozi got mad at them (Through their description, I feared they were being bullied). This made me feel angry towards Taozi, though she had always been very active and supportive in my research. This is because the examples shared by Duan and Xiaoyue were very similar to my childhood*

*experience of being bullied by 'my friends' Liu and Die. Duan said if Taozi got mad at her, she would demand all other girls not to play with her and speak ill of her. Xiaoyue said Taozi would ask them to return all the gifts she sent to them since Primary Year one!! (POOR girls - Duan, Xiaoyue, and young me decades ago! I still remember that I cried a lot because some gifts Liu and Die gave me were sweets which I ate and couldn't return!! I also remembered they wrote a list of 'gifts' that I needed to return and threatened if I failed to do so, they would ask all the girls from the class to not play with me!) [Yan's Fieldnotes, 7 April 2016]*

Here Yan's fieldnotes are deeply reflective of her personal experiences, influencing the emotions towards the participants in the field. Often to balance participant observation and note-taking, some fieldnotes were recorded as jotted notes (Emerson *et al.* 2011) which were detailed later. While adding details to these notes, she felt strong emotions from memories of being bullied, which interfered with the recording process of similar experiences from the field. For example, children, whose experiences seemed similar to that of the researcher were given more attention in both the observation and the notes. Similar to Emerson *et al.* (2011) who argue that researchers might use their personal experience of events that trigger strong emotions, such as pleasure, shock, and anger, to identify and select noteworthy events from the field. As reflexive researchers we were aware of these biases, trying to minimize their impact on the research process, yet being humble about the limitations of human emotions and their influence on the process of research.

At other times, less intense emotions also guide the course of taking fieldnotes. We observed that during the initial phase of the research, the observations and note-taking were driven by the enthusiasm to record every detail from the field. However, in relatively long-term ethnographic fieldwork, gradually, as the events became routine, repetitive and even boring in some cases, the researchers find it hard to sustain interest in detailing events. We observed that as the fieldwork progressed, the fieldnotes gradually became shorter and less detailed. This further led to other emotions including anxiety about losing useful data and the guilt of wasting invaluable fieldwork time. For example, both Ambika and Yan did ethnographic fieldwork in their home countries. In general, similar language, culture and knowledge of schooling systems offered easy access and a relatively good understanding of their participants and research context. However, at the same time, it presented them with the challenge of maintaining excitement and curiosity with which to value, recognize and record taken-for-granted, trivial and ordinary phenomena in their fieldnotes. These examples help to explore a wide range of emotions, experienced by the researchers in the field, that influence the process of taking fieldnotes.

## Conclusion

There is ample discussion of agency, power and emotions in the process of fieldwork with children but how these play in the researchers' experiences of note taking is not well documented. In this article, through a discussion of a reflexive approach, we present the complexities to highlight how the context and relational experiences of both the researcher and researched communities affect and shape note taking processes in ethnographic research with children. This article discusses various instances where the researchers had to change the planned course of taking fieldnotes to respect children's agency, adjust power asymmetry amongst adult researchers and child participants which is not discussed in the literature related to ethnographic fieldnotes.

The article highlights how agency is important while writing the stories of people who have historically been marginalized. Through addressing questions of voice researchers can consider if they are focussing on themes relevant to the participants or only what concerns the research agenda. Through negotiating power flexible, the authors of this paper attempt to ensure that the strategies used to record children's experiences allowed children to be co-producers of the knowledge. The process of navigating the emotional landscapes of notetaking in ethnographic fields reminds us of the importance of viewing both the child participants and the adult researchers as feeling human beings. Including emotions as an important lens could indicate the ongoing and complex impact on data collection and selection in ethnographic notetaking.

Throughout the paper, we engage in discussions around our attempts at balancing interwoven challenges, including commitment to ethical principles, power asymmetry, conflicts between different groups, and concerns about the quality and quantity of data.

Through unpacking the emergence of concepts – agency, power, and emotion, and their impact in the process of ethnographic note-taking, we observe these concepts as closely interwoven in both theoretical discussions and empirical practices. Thus, arguing that agency, power, and emotion should not only be limited to theoretical concepts in literature but involved in discussions that contextualize them in the ethnographic landscape that are often chaotic and messy. Through presenting discussions from their field, we aim to help other researchers navigate the field and encourage them to talk about raw data, which is usually considered private, messy and at times emotionally loaded. Along with being considered a good practice, uncomfortable discussions and self-disclosure can contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of documenting children's world.

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