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Disrupting the picture: Reflections on choices, resistance and consequences in a pre-study

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Abstract
Reflecting on the implementation of a pre-study may be decisive for the design of a following main study. This text consists of a reflective process where the researcher’s different choices are examined and problematised. The reflections take place within the framework of a pre-study and in relation to the aim of that study. They also take place in and through the written language, i.e. in the process where “the language turns back on itself to see the work it does in constituting the world” at the same time as “the subject/researcher sees ... the object of her ... gaze and the means by which the object is being constituted” (Davies et al., 2004:360). By doing this, different consequences can be discussed in relation to gender, the art subject and methods as well as the academic context and become understandable. The text may thus be regarded as an investigative and critical text with the ambition to understand and create meaning, both on an overarching and an individual level, about what the researcher has experienced. The reflections chiefly concern the gathering of material, choices of methods and the resistance that occurred in these two areas. The choices of methods refer to selected as well as forgotten methods and how this forgetfulness includes pictures’ elusive information in an academic context. The writing process brings the researcher’s situated knowledge to the fore.

Keywords: research methods, gender, art education, emotion, teacher education

Introduction
With a light palpitation of the heart and some nervousness mixed with curiosity I step into the group of students to inform them about my research project. My purpose is to obtain informants for a pre-study. The information functions relatively well, some students are unequivocally interested and directly fill in their consent forms. Then somebody asks, “Do I have to decide now?”. “No, of course not” I answer, at the same time as I observe that the atmosphere in the room changes from interest to resistance. It would turn out that the resistance persisted in the group and that the difficulty of obtaining informants was repeated. What is the reason for this? Are the reasons due to my request, to the aim of the study, its design or complex factors that are difficult to immediately grasp?
The aim of this article is to reflect on different choices, what I did and what I did not do, in the pre-study. This is done within the framework of the pre-study, for example to understand the resistance that sometimes occurred and other consequences of my choices. I do this in a feminist tradition of reflecting not only on the research object but also on the research subject (Harding, 1986, 1991; Ehn & Klein, 1994; Magnusson, 1998; Widerberg, 2002; Davies et al., 2004). By critically examining what happened, what I did and said, I turn my gaze both at the contexts in which the pre-study took place and the contexts in which my informants and myself as a researcher are actors. In these contexts an influence inevitably takes place or, as Davies formulates it with reference to Foucault, “the self who carries out research and the self who is the subject of the researcher’s gaze ... is there, as an effect of discourse” (Davies et al., 2004:364). This text may thus be regarded as an investigative and critical text with the ambition to understand and create meaning, both on an overarching and an individual level, about what I experienced in the pre-study in order to be able to act more consciously in the main study.

The most frequent term for a small study made before a main study is pilot study. A pilot study is supposed to give valuable information to the researcher about the project’s questions, possible reformulations, and experiences in the work and the meeting with informants and the material, in order to optimise the quality of the main study. Another designation – pre-project – has other and partially similar ambitions (Widerberg, 2002). In a pre-project, researchers obtain ideas about the thematisation of a problem area, often by acquiring their own experience of the research questions and the projected investigation (Skåreus, 2007:29). It functions then as reflective work where one can “position oneself in relation to the theme” (Widerberg, 2002:103). Since I have not fully followed Karin Widerberg’s instructions for pre-projects, which in her version can also contain memory-work based on Frigga Haug’s model (Widerberg, 2002:45), I have chosen instead to use the term pre-study, a combination of the two terms.

My reflective work moves in the text on two different levels, namely on gathering material, i.e. information occasion and consent, and on selected and forgotten methods of analysis. The questions I have primarily worked with are: How can I understand the informants’ resistance? Which consequences can I see based on the choices I made? In order for the reflections to gain a foothold, here follows first of all a short presentation of the research project and some of its theoretical points of departure.

**Background**

*Presentation of the project*

The research project’s overarching aim is to study how emotions and gender interact in the teaching practice of schools. For the pre-study I worked with the question: Which emotions do students in the teacher education programmes, specialising in
art and media, describe as memorable during their teaching training period? The material will be students’ own pictures with the motif “an emotionally loaded event”, i.e. something they experienced during or in relation to a teaching situation, “positive or negative, dramatic or trivial” in a practical training period (information letter, 2010). The students will also make a brief note on what the picture represents. These two statements, one depicting and one verbal, then form the basis for an interview between the informant and myself lasting 30 minutes.

My point of departure, that gender and emotions interact in teaching, may be found in several contexts. The educational researcher Eva Gannerud points out that emotions constitute a central aspect of a teacher’s work, a statement the sociologist R.W. Connell also emphasises (Gannerud, 1999; Connell, 2000). “The work of a teacher requires an emotional relation to the pupils” (Gannerud, 1999:35). Patterns of emotion are one of R.W. Connell’s four analytic dimensions of factors that influence an institution’s gender regime, i.e. the local variation of society’s overarching gender order (Connell 2000:153, 2002:86; Nordberg, 2005). The other three are power, division of labour and symbolic relations. Through the interacting relation structures, education creates its definitions of gender, impersonal and existing as social facts. The regulation of an institution’s emotional relations, i.e. what is legitimate to express, Connell compares to what Arlie Russel Hochschild calls “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1983/2003). In The Managed Heart from 1983 Hochschild studies flight attendants’ commercialised emotional work where “feeling rules”, defined by the airlines, control what are emotionally legitimate actions in the profession. Connell thinks there are also “feeling rules” controlling how teachers can act and relate in the activities of schools. The conditions given by the gender order have consequences for teachers as professional individuals in their experiences of their exercise of the profession and also for their working conditions (Gannerud, 2009). A study by Michalinos Zembylas (2005) very clearly shows how a school’s implicit rules for emotions control and regulate a teacher’s scope of action and state which emotions are permissible and in what form they may be expressed.

In the wide field of research on emotions that has developed in the last few decades, both nationally and internationally and in widely different disciplines, a number of different theoretical explanatory models have emerged (Hochschild, 1983/2003; hooks, 1995; Woodward, 1996; Rey, 2000; Koivunen, 2001; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Ahmed, 2004). In educational science, there is also increasing interest in research on emotions (Nias, 1996; Hargreaves, 1998, 2000, 2001; Veen & Lasky, 2005; Zembylas, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). Roughly divided one might say that emotions are regarded either as connected to individuals or as cultural expressions. As something individual, they can rest passively within a human being, be aroused by external impulses and mainly constitute a biological process (Darwin, 1872/2009; Freud, 1895/1995; Hochschild, 1983/2003; Ahmed, 2004; Zembylas, 2007a). bell hooks (1995) points out that this perspective presupposes an essential view of human expressions and actions.
as a result of the subject’s race and gender and not as a result of cultural mastery. As cultural expressions, emotions are regarded as part of human beings’ cognition or as a way of understanding the world (Nussbaum, 2001; Elam, 2001). As sensual and cognitive signs, emotions obtain or are given meaning and importance in their cultural context and become part of social, historical and cultural factors embedded in local conditions (hooks, 1995; Ahmed, 2004).

According to SAOB (Svenska Akademins Ordbok ['the Swedish Academy Dictionary']), emotion and feeling are synonyms and comprise mental states including physiological reactions where the word affect indicates that the emotion is strong. I have chosen to separate the terms where feeling represents something sensual that the subject experiences and names (entitle), and emotion represents the designation or categorisation of gestures, facial expressions and actions between human beings. Emotions are then cultural appearances, performative signs that circulate among people. The definitions are inspired by Sara Ahmed, Professor of Race and Cultural Studies, and her book The Cultural Politics of Emotions (2004), and provide a perspective that abandons an individual and psychologising logic demanding authenticity. Emotions are instead regarded as ascribed attributes through which the subject forms/is formed or constructs/is constructed as e.g. a happy, angry, frustrated, empathic, rational or emotional actor in time and space. The focus is then instead on what emotions do than what they are (Ahmed, 2004:7). Through emotional relations (parts of) a school’s gender regime are ‘done’ and manifested. In this case, I regard teacher education as an arena on a level with the school, comprising a local gender regime, where both the school’s and society’s more overarching gender order exert an influence.

**Choices and consequences**

In the pre-study the choice of informants was students at a large university in Sweden studying to be teachers, specialising in either art or media. Both educations are aimed at upper secondary schools and run for nine semesters where the major subject is complemented with a minor subject. The choice of student groups is based to a great extent on my interest in working with pictures as analytical material (Skåreus, 2007, 2009, 2011). On one hand, these groups are used to and skilled in working with and expressing themselves in pictures, which increases the chances of obtaining richer material in terms of content. On the other hand, they are relatively few in number, which may be seen as a negative limitation, in spite of which I made this delimitation. In my thesis work the material consisted only of pictures, depicted statements, and now my ambition is to increase the material with verbal statements. The picture maker is thereby given a greater preferential right of interpretation, which was not the case in the thesis work. In conversations the students’ understanding of pictures, both technically and in terms of content, may be advantageous at the same time as I am interested in comparing my interpretations of the pictures with the picture makers’ narratives.
In the spring of 2009 I started the first part of the pre-study by participating as an observer on two occasions when in small groups art and media students respectively accounted for their placement experiences. I wanted to gain an understanding of whether the students talked about emotions at all, how they did it in such cases and where the main focus of the talks was. I made notes where the foci were explicit or embodied emotions during the speech act. Few emotions were mentioned and the main focus was rather on lesson proposals, implementation and other technicalities. In the observation notes there are nevertheless notes on the students’ pronounced happiness and frustration but also on my own interpretations of their partially explicit but mostly implicit powerlessness vis-à-vis pupils. But sitting as a highly occasional observer in a group naturally affects a discussion, something I was highly aware of. I still thought that the observations gave me an idea of what was legitimate to talk about and in retrospect I can note that the topics provided an agenda for my expectations.

In the autumn of 2010 the second part of the pre-study started in the form I intended to use in the main study. The design comprises: an information meeting with written information and a form to hand in providing consent to take part in the study; a picture created by each informant during the placement period at a school; mailing the picture to me before the talk; a first picture analysis made by me before the meeting and without the student’s narrative; an interview with the informant lasting roughly 30 minutes about the picture – about what feeling is depicted – concluded by the student reading out her/his notes. The two groups I came to contact were not students I had met before. On both information occasions I first introduced myself, then presented the aim of the study and what participation would involve. I also presented and related briefly to my thesis.

**On resistance – and gender**

The reception in the groups differed, but the results were the same: few students were interested in participating, although I returned to both groups to give them a reminder. The difficulties in obtaining participants aroused thoughts, doubts and speculations about possible reasons. As a gender researcher it is easy to explain listeners’ resistance with the research orientation. I would not like to call it a paranoid attitude; too many researchers and educationists have mentioned the difficulties of this choice of subject in various teaching contexts (Bondestam, 2003, 2007; Wahl et al., 2008), but choosing that explanation automatically is problematic. In spite of this, perhaps the combination of the subject of art, gender and emotions may be conceived as provocative or something one does not want to be involved in.

Internationally and in Sweden a power order can be identified both among the different subjects of education (Connell, 2000; Marner, 2006) and the different age levels (Drudy, 2008; Hjalmarsson, 2009), an order that to a high degree may be related to gender (Connell, 2000; Swain, 2005; Larsson, 2005). When Swedish politicians point to what they regard as the most important school subjects, it is mathematics, Swedish
and English that are mentioned. Art is a subject that is recurrently being threatened in the educational policy, and Swedish pupils in lower secondary schools regard it as a fun but unimportant subject (Marner & Segerstedt & Örtegren, 2003). The subject of art may thus be regarded as subordinate to languages and mathematics, i.e. in the symbolic relations of education where knowledge is gender-marked and hence interacts with power aspects. But it is also possible to add a further dimension, the emotional one. In historical retrospect in connection with presentations of emotion research (Sutton & Wheatley, 1996; Koivunen, 2001; Zembylas, 2007), the academic view of emotions recurs as an explanation of the absence of the subject in research. Historically (and today as well) feelings have been regarded as something feminine and irrational, a categorisation in contrast to rationality, and hence outside scientific controllable knowledge. In older syllabuses for art, the emotional aspect is included (Skolverket, 2006) and pupils in primary and lower secondary schools also talk about the subject of art as strongly associated with feeling (Wikberg in press, 2012). In a search among older texts on the history of art one can also find the combination of art and feelings when art is linked to upbringing (Read, 1956). Has the nearness between feelings and the subject of art, the associative connection, accumulated the subordinate position of the subject of art just there and then?

If I now place the students in the academic context where they were on the information occasion, it is possible that both their position as students in the education and history of academia in relation to feelings was brought to the fore. As regards the students’ power position in education, it may be said to hover between being students at the university and teachers in schools (Gustavsson, 2008). Their prepared power position hovers (and is thus not given, since power is done on a daily basis) between subordination and supremacy depending on what place they are at. On the information occasion I talked explicitly about gender and emotions in the educational practice of the subject of art and connected it to the students’ own activities. Based on this reasoning, I cannot avoid asking myself to what degree my presentation of the subject brought up different notions of emotions, gender and the school subject of art in relation to power and subordination. Could the explicit feminine marking of the subject have influenced the student (a man) who asked “Do I have to decide now?” as mentioned in the introduction to this article. Regardless of whether this was the case, these aspects may be something that student teachers must more or less relate to and position themselves against in relation to both the education and to a research project that explicitly thematises these issues.

With these thoughts in my head I decided to make a short inquiry in the first group where the question was asked and where I experienced clear resistance. A few weeks after the information meeting and the following reminder meeting, I asked their teacher to hand out a questionnaire in which the students were asked to briefly answer why they had refused to take part in the pre-study. Nearly all of them said that a lack of time was the reason. Some added a lack of interest and one student had not
understood the purpose of the investigation. In retrospect, this solution to my curiosity appears slightly naïve. What did I think they would answer? Did I really believe they would confirm what I had reasoned about above? Or mention any of it at all?

**On resistance – and academic language**

But what is my own part in the resistance I triggered? As I learned in my naïve, but still implemented inquiry, the students answered that some lack time and others are uninterested. What I asked for were their time and interest, which few were willing to give. One aspect of the resistance may be explained here. But I also asked them in an academic language. What fundamental view of the students did I communicate, through the academic language, in my talk about gender and emotions?

As an academic I talk about abstractions, gender and emotions, and use the language in which I have been educated in academia. Through the language and delimitations I make, I turn to them as fragments and not as whole human beings. In the students’ situation, just before the placement period, maybe with light nervousness, uncertainty, curiosity and expectant tension or with a mixture of all this, I asked them for a motif of something fragmented. What association does this give, based on their lived experiences? That my research delimitations, gender and emotions alienates them from their own existence? In retrospect, I can even claim that I made them [cephalopods] (see e.g. Rönnblom 1999:61), human beings consisting only of gender and emotions on two legs. How can I understand that, when my ambition is to meet them (and all other human beings I meet) as whole human beings?

Foucault would probably have answered that discourses function in a self-disciplining manner (Foucault, 1993) and Bourdieu that I had for several years been working with gathering cultural capital in academia in order to attain legitimacy, which in turn had permeated both my actions and my way of thinking and speaking (Bourdieu, 1996). And the scientific approach, which is based on analysis and not on empathy, also has repercussions for me as a researcher. As Annelie Bränström Öhman points out in an essay on *Kärlek och andra laglösa känslor* [Love and other lawless feelings], feminist researchers in the field of emotions have “seemingly without friction … adapted themselves to a rational view of language”, which among other things has sometimes resulted in an “almost laboratory-like systematisation ardour”, in wanting to distinguish and define “emotions” from “feeling”, “affect” and “passion” (Bränström Öhman, 2011:159, my translation). The description reverberates against my own theoretical points of departure and a slight “word shame”, “a linguistic embarrassment” presents itself (Riley, 2005). But in the gap between what an academic normative culture expects and the resistance the students displayed, I think that I can see my own exertion of power through a scientific language. In the struggle to acquire academic legitimacy, and above all as a woman in a feminine-marked area (talking about emotions), I took that struggle with me into the student group. In spite of the chosen research area, I wanted to appear as a rational researcher with intact
authority. Power is exerted through language, a self-evident insight in many ways, but also too easy to forget.

**On resistance – and theoretical choices**

The theoretical choices a researcher makes are, so to speak, the researcher’s own concern. At the same time, it may be important to include some aspects vis-à-vis the informants since the choices indicate the researcher’s epistemological foundation. But how much of the theoretical perspective should the researcher inform about? What is relevant and how can it be done without unnecessarily muddling the information?

At the information meeting I used both the word *emotions* and the word *feelings*, the latter as a clarification in order to connect to a more ordinary definition. But as Ahmed (2004:7) points out, feelings attribute the subject as having different properties in everyday speech; one is e.g. happy and hence owns the happiness as an inner characteristic. In everyday speech, feelings appear as an individual concern rather than as an attribute marked by a local culture’s rules and regulation of legitimate actions in relation to others. The question of individual or cultural regulation may be regarded in the light of what a professional education offers. Besides professional knowledge, the individual is offered different action models, solutions or proposals for how to act or, as Berger & Luckmann express it, the notion that the professional roles represent an institutional order in which the individuals “are partially hidden in an institutional body” (Berger & Luckmann, 1998:92, my translation). A working culture also provides prerequisites for being able to perform work more or less well. To what degree do student teachers regard experiences in the teaching practice as individually caused or socially prepared? Do they look upon their own successes or failures as being due to themselves or as facilitated by the structure or as structural faults? An individualistic explanatory model, where only the teacher is made responsible for how the work functions, may be connected to the personality discourse that is clearly observable in teacher education. Despite a clear professional orientation, notions of the importance of personality play an important role for student teachers (Skåreus, 2007; Åberg, 2008). One of the informants in the pre-study talks about dreariness during the placement and paints herself grey in the picture. If it is an experience she shares with other students (as indicated in the main study), and a position that is only given individual explanations and not placed in a relevant context, it might not initially be a pictorial motif that is directly attractive. If individual difficulties, or what the subject judges as failures, are not analysed in relation to cultural and structural preconditions, perhaps participation in the study might be experienced as risky. Who would like to describe their individual shortcomings as memorable, based on that explanatory model? Just as important as meeting the informants as whole individuals and not as fragments or “cephalopods” is explaining some of my points of departure, such as e.g. my view of the preconditions the students encounter during their placement and how decisive the structure may be for the individual in her/his professional practice.
**Picture analysis and text analysis – chosen and forgotten methods**

In spring 2011, I started to compile and process the pre-study based on a number of pictures, transcriptions and collected notes. The pictures had been analysed by means of the tools I had used in my previous work (Skåreus, 2007:37f, 2009) to find out to what degree it was possible to interpret the students’ representations of emotions. I made a comparison between what I had found out and what the students told me.

In the interpretation of the talks, via the transcriptions, I concentrated on emotional words and dramatic or loaded turning points in their narratives. As the narratives seemed on a superficial level to be a form of success stories, they opened up for deconstruction and reasoning about underlying difficulties, i.e. the problems the students had possibly overcome. When writing, I did put pictures and texts together and only afterwards discovered that the combination was a reproduction of the academic writing culture, “the primacy of the printed word” (Erixon, 2010:131). The pictures only constitute illustrations for the analysis of the students’ verbal narratives. What my compilation represents was: it is in words and solely through words that knowledge can be analysed and represented. In my eyes, with a research career where pictures have primarily constituted the material for studies, I can blame myself for having committed a sin of omission. How did I end up there?

First of all, there is this business about pictures. Pictures and words are certainly different semiotic systems of signs (Marner, 1999), but both mediate meaning (Marner & Örtegren, 2003:23). There is no “relation of similarity between the words ... and an externally located reality”, as Erixon quite correctly points out (Erixon, 2010:139), but signs are analysed, interpreted, associated and accepted by an active subject as a representation of a depicted object (Bal, 1998). The active subject is also in a cultural and social context, i.e. the meaning creating process is socially situated (Skåreus, 2007:35). In my compilation, the context stands out strongly, the invisibly active discourse of academia where verbal statements naturally carry knowledge and validity. But all signs need to be interpreted – words, figures and pictures. The different modalities represent knowledge and meaning in different ways. The students’ verbal narratives comprised a dramaturgical line of past time, situation, event or relation and some form of reflecting postscript about where they are today when looking back at their pictures. To a greater extent their pictures materialise a frozen moment in the depicted class room, or an emotional state or mood. The narrative timeline or development is then not obvious in the same way as in a verbal statement.

Art is a different kind of statement where different signs may represent changes, as e.g. an empty railway platform may signify that a train has just left or will soon arrive (Skåreus, 2007:38). Other indexical signs (than merely “an empty railway platform”), such as people in motion on their way to or from the platform, may give further associations and indicate that a train has just left if the people are moving away from the platform. An observer of the picture can also imagine a past and a future in the picture with the aid of what is called the referential framework of the picture (Marner,
by means of indexical signs. Then the observer widens the picture’s depicted room to comprise an imagined room. What the observer sees is then to be transferred to another modality, to words, perhaps not a translation, since the meaning is moved between different systems of signs, but what Bezemer & Kress call a “transduction” (2008:169).

It was here that I forgot myself, at an individual level, perhaps because it is always a struggle in academia to assert that the picture’s own statement is equal to that of words and that my interpretations of pictures may be scientifically relevant. It may be related to a structural level where aspects such as the academic structure or discourse influence myself as a researcher. I have touched on this in several ways in the text; a fragmenting look at the students’ situation as student teachers and my implicit basic assumptions of which preconditions the structures of schools give the individual student during her/his placement. The language is also important here, the language I use in research contexts through which existence is strained and creates repercussions for what can be visible and what can be said.

**One step backwards to move forwards**

I might call my behaviour an appropriation of the academic discourse, while my thesis initially was a resistance to it. Having acted for several years to become a legitimate researcher, forgetfulness of other positions has slowly appeared. Through the reflective work this writing has involved, I have been able to look back at different elements that initially seemed to be difficult to grasp immediately. By scrutinising my meetings with students, in dialogue with different perspectives, different realities and by weaving them together with my experiences as a researcher, the writing process brings to the fore the situated experience of working in academia and what that structure does to me (see e.g. Norlander, 1994). In the reflective writing and via the text a fictitious ego also emerges which both has and does not have a counterpart in lived life. The narrative that is created through the text is both I and not I, or as Roland Barthes says in an interview about the book *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) “The subject that I am is not unified (...) To then say ‘It’s I!’ would be to postulate a unity of self that I do not recognize in myself” (Barthes, 1985:305).

When I now try to round off a process that has hardly been linear, the question “Who wants to know?” also crops up. Naomi Scheman argues that this classic gangster film retort is a key question (Scheman, 1993:205). Seeking the answer to the riddle, it points out the direction of the value of discussing scientific knowledge and the overt or covert power potential that exists there. The aim I stated initially, to reflect within the framework of a pre-study on different choices, what I did and what I did not do, may therefore be said to place expectations on attained knowledge. I feel able to step forward at the end of this text, without blushing with shame, and say, “This is what I have learned”. One aspect can be found in the words formulated by Bronwyn Davies and her colleagues:
It is in looking at what is found when one gazes at oneself as constituted subject and the means of its constitution that the details may be found that enable researchers to recognize and (at least momentarily) break out of the oppressive determinate structures and practices through which those selves are constituted and made real (Davies et al., 2004:368).

I prefer to formulate another aspect of gained knowledge as a question: Is it that easy that I should start information meetings by saying that I am interested in finding out what their (the students’) situation is like during their placement period?

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References


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