

The Politics of Nuclear Power in Finland

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Trust at the Core?

By

Lotta I. Lounasmeri

Translated from the original Finnish
by David Kivinen and Lotta Lounasmeri

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Dedicated To All Those Who Work for Freedom

“Think While It’s Still Legal”
(Fisherman From Nauvo/Nagu, Finland)

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FOREWORD

Dear reader,

I set out to write this book several years ago, following up on my research into power. I was intrigued by power: the people who seemed to possess it, how they used it, what they thought of it. I have wandered around the world among different spheres and different tribes, clans and characters, but always returned to my home in Finland. My years and experiences abroad made me look at my own tribe with new eyes. What made my fellow compatriots in positions of power tick, what made them trust, love and fear? I wanted to know, so I asked. I chose a topic—a new nuclear power plant—that was controversial and made people’s blood boil, as the saying goes. It also meant sweat and tears for me, and many moments of hesitation and disbelief. Finally this book was born as I felt the message it contains was too important to be left unsaid, a message to everyone who cares about their own community and its well-being.

I want to thank the Academy of Finland for awarding me a three-year research grant which made this work possible. I also want to thank all those people involved in the Fennovoima nuclear power plant who granted me an interview. It was truly a gift. The Centre for European Studies at the University of Helsinki was my academic community for many years: my dear colleagues, thank you for everything you shared with me during that time! Fruitful discussions and debates, new insights, personal reflections. My special thanks go to Juhana Aunesluoma, my dear colleague, mentor and friend, who read my texts, commented and discussed, encouraged and tirelessly gave me feedback. Thank you for all your support. During my research period, I worked as a visiting researcher at the University of Oslo. This year was life-changing for me, and I made some invaluable academic friends: Eli Skogerbo, Christina Archetti, Banafsheh Ranji, Oyvind Ihlen and others, thank you for all the thought-provoking discussions, the great ideas you offered, as well as for your hospitality and friendship. During the years that I studied the Fennovoima case, my colleague Pertti Vehkalahti from the University of Tampere gave me most valuable insights into the project, having studied it himself. Almost since the beginning of my academic career, I have had the privilege to know and work with Johanna

Sumiala from the University of Helsinki: thank you for offering your insights and always encouraging me, and simply being there.

The message of this book is to never underestimate the power of love. This I have been taught, time and again, and so my deepest thanks go to my beloved, crazy fisherman and partner in mediation as well as meditation, Tuukka Fabritius. In this book I write about the impossible becoming possible, something I have come to experience personally. Thank you, Tuukka, for believing in me, and in us. The last steps to finish this book were taken hand in hand with you.

29 August 2022 on the day of Inari, Nauvo/Nagu, Finland

Lotta I. Lounasmeri

“In Harrisburg they said people stay inside
we in Finland we’d just take it in our stride
Harrisburg’s a million miles away
No no that could never happen
Down our way

Perfect don’t exist anywhere, it just can’t
except at the Olkiluoto power plant
Engineers they’re a brilliant type
They say it’s just perfect
Every screw ‘n’ pipe

We’re splitting uranium
and lighting up every stadium
But Finland’s the only country
where it’s all risk-free

Know-alls everywhere, their phantasies
Urho Kekkonen and the power companies
No risk they say, on and on
Unless China repeats
The Finland phenomenon”¹

¹ Eppu Normaali: Suomi-ilmiö [The Finland phenomenon], 1980.

INTRODUCTION

NUCLEAR POWER IN FINLAND: TALKING ABOUT ENERGY AND TRUST

Finland's all-time favourite rock band Eppu Normaali said it all back in 1980—and yet in the 2020s, we're still asking the same question: How to understand the Finland phenomenon? In today's version of the story, Harrisburg has been replaced by Fukushima, Olkiluoto by the northern community of Pyhäjoki, long-time president Urho Kekkonen by Sauli Niinistö or maybe the industrial magnate Björn Wahlroos, and the state-owned Imatran Voima by the newly founded nuclear company Fennovoima. But the core nucleus is still there, unchanged. What, precisely, is this Finland phenomenon; the power that makes Finnish people work together and trust each other and the world around them—and continue to build nuclear power plants?

The question of nuclear power, and the story of Fennovoima, opens an interesting window onto the Finnish culture of trust. In what and how do Finnish people trust—what kind of collective belief system lies at the foundation of public life and decision-making? Trust is the lifeblood of any community, essential for its members to be able to work together and promote the common good. Understanding Finnishness, I think, can help uncover something universal about trust.

A community's decision-making system should serve the common *raison d'être*, and for me, being part of this community, the question is, what is that for Finland and for Finnish people in today's world? It might be unfashionable to ponder questions of existence in a national context. Despite the seemingly victorious new world order, I would argue that as human beings we are still connected to the land, as well as to language. In order to understand oneself and others, it is important to explore one's own roots and to revisit the stories with which one has grown up. I hope that by putting forward this analysis of Finland, I can encourage the reader to look at the narrative close to their own heart.

In winter and spring 2022, many Finns were recovering—at least momentarily—from a pandemic and its consequences and following the news from the Ukraine conflict. The world was changing visibly before everyone’s eyes, in irreversible ways, and often breeding fear instead of trust. The foundations and strength of trust in a community are put to the test in the event of crisis. At the moment of a turning point it might be difficult to see what common trust is based on and how conscious we are as individuals of the *raison d’être* of our community. Do we share such a *raison d’être*, and how?

I started writing this book back in 2017. Since then, both Finnish energy policy and world events have made it ever more apparent that each of us—decision-makers and citizens alike—need to take a closer look at our belief systems. What is that common good we are willing to work for, and how does our decision-making system work? Does that system actually further the common good, and how does it reflect the values of an open and inclusive democracy?

Becoming a modern Western nation with the help of nuclear power

If we turn our gaze to history to better understand the Finnish case, we can find certain factors that have enhanced the culture of social trust. In modern times, these factors have included a constant and continued belief in the power of enlightened education, technology and bureaucracy. The role of technology in societal development has been crucial, and Finns have been quick and ready to develop and adopt innovations.² Stretching back to the premodern and the Finnish epos *Kalevala*, we can see another side of Finland. In the 19th century, the young nation was developed by building on literary, artistic and nature bound traditions, creating a Finland of *Väinämöinen*, the poetic hero of ancient *Kalevala*. In the 20th century, by contrast, industrialization, technology, bureaucracy and urbanization helped create the modern Finland of *Ilmarinen*, the industrious blacksmith in *Kalevala*. According to a prominent physician in charge of atomic energy development in Finland in the 1950s, the latter would help build a

² Litmanen, Tapio. “The Transillumination of Finnish Nuclear Policy: Seeking a Shortcut to a Low Carbon Society”. In *The Renewal of Nuclear Power in Finland*, edited by Kojo, Matti and Litmanen, Tapio, 3-37. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

technologically more independent and self-confident nation.³ At the time, the country was poor and needed new technology to support industrialization and to generate the energy needed to keep the wheels of industry turning. One of the solutions that began to gain traction in the 1960s was nuclear energy, and the first power plants were completed in the 1970s, after many twists and turns.

After a long hiatus and the rise of environmental consciousness, a new dawn for nuclear began to break in Finland around the turn of the millennium. In the latest round of decisions in 2010, the Finnish Parliament issued a Decision-in-Principle for the construction of two new nuclear power plants. The first licence was awarded to Teollisuuden Voima (TVO), a forest industry owned conglomerate that had received an earlier licence in 2002, but against all expectations the second licence didn't go to the front runner Fortum, a well-established state-owned energy company formerly known as Imatran Voima (IVO). Instead, it was given to a newly founded company called Fennovoima, which was jointly owned by Finnish metal industry and retail businesses, local electricity producers and the German energy giant E.ON. This book tells the story of the beginning of Fennovoima's journey and the company's steps towards a new nuclear power plant in the northern Finnish community of Pyhäjoki ("Sacred River" in English). Through the many setbacks faced by Fennovoima, the story brings to light something essential about the core of Finnishness.

At the time of the first power plants, nuclear energy represented a modern technology that was independent of the forces of nature, thus symbolizing man's omnipotence. In the 20th century Finland has been built, with determination, into a Western, materially well-off nation relying on scientific and technological advancement. Nevertheless I think that the roots of Finnish social trust go much much deeper, into that natural connection associated with the age-old shaman *Väinämöinen*. Indeed, cultural anthropologists have described Finland as a high context culture where the primary mode of communication is not through words. This brings us to an intriguing question: how far back in history can we trace the origins of mutual trust towards one another? In a culture of trust where a non-verbal code and mutual understanding are crucial, everyone knows, instinctively,

³ Paju, Petri. *"Ilmarisen Suomi" ja sen tekijät: Matematiikkakonekomitea ja tietokoneen rakentaminen kansallisena kysymyksenä 1950-luvulla*. (University of Turku, 2008). Erkki Laurila (1913-1998) was chair of the Council of State Energy Committee, and closely involved in the introduction of atomic energy in Finland. He presented his musings of Finland based on *Kalevala* in 1954.

what the rules or practices in the community are. I was intrigued by this, and wondered if I could perhaps pin down those elusive customs that made up the nation's "customary law".

The story of Fennovoima comes to light through interviews

Following the Decision-in-Principle in 2010, the story of Fennovoima took some unexpected twists and turns, and in the end Russia's state-owned atomic corporation Rosatom came onboard as part owner. Construction work on the plant itself never materialized, however. It took years for Fennovoima to deliver the relevant safety documentation to the Finnish radiation safety authority STUK. As the paperwork was finally completed in March 2022, Minister of Economic Affairs and Employment Mika Lintilä announced that under the current circumstances, he would not present the construction licence issue to Parliament. By May the same year, Fennovoima terminated its contract with Rosatom, and withdrew its application from the Finnish Parliament.

Even before the geopolitical upheavals in the winter of 2022, much of what has happened around Fennovoima has been hard for an outsider to understand. From the outset, the project was faced with seemingly overwhelming obstacles and was sent back to the drawing board several times, yet it refused to die. The reasons that were given for persisting with the project did not seem to make much sense or were contradictory to say the least. Yet the official assurance was that it will all turn out to be right in the end—and the project continued to steam ahead, until the spring of 2022. I set out to write this book because I was completely baffled, as a Finnish citizen and a social scientist, by the way that decision-making around energy issues seemed to work: it was as if there was an invisible force hovering in the background, driving matters inescapably in a certain direction, regardless of any obstacle or counterarguments.

The story of Fennovoima and its many ins and outs have been covered in at least two extensive journalistic reports⁴ and in two doctoral theses, one of

⁴ Nikkanen, Hanna. 2015. *Fennomania*. Helsinki: Long Play.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27208085-fennomania>;

Skyten, Emmi. 2015. "Miten tähän päädyttiin? Fennovoiman ihmeellinen historia". *Vihreä Lanka*, August 5, 2015.

which was focused on the political process⁵ and the other on the public debate surrounding the project.⁶ In addition, Fennovoima has published a history of the company's first ten years. All these accounts have been helpful for me in getting a handle on the story of Fennovoima. This book, however, is focused on people: those individuals who have been involved in the making of Fennovoima, as well as those who have opposed the project.⁷ My aim with this book is to understand Fennovoima through interviews, by creating a historical, cultural and social frame around the events, by drawing its elements from people's accounts, views and emotions, the ways in which they describe their relationship to events, other people and the surrounding society. The story provides a backdrop for exploring the rules of community formation, common beliefs, and the system behind those beliefs. This exploration represents a research approach that combines ethnographic analysis, collective self-understanding and personal account. The story is told not only in my voice, but also in the voice of the interviewees whom I met and who were willing to share their experiences.

Between 2017 and 2018 I interviewed 25 people who had been involved in the Fennovoima project in one way or the other (especially between 2010-2016): national and local level politicians, civil servants and public officials dealing with energy policy issues, energy companies' management and employees, and NGO representatives. Not everyone I contacted was willing to speak with me: I was unable to secure an interview from any of the owners of Fennovoima at the time. All no doubt had their reasons for speaking with me or deciding not to, and in the end it is always down to the researcher to interpret what really counts and what to trust. By interviewing people in positions of power, I wanted to find out how these people think and what makes them "tick". These people are often referred to as the elite, a special group of individuals or layer in society who wield significant influence. I wanted to know what kinds of beliefs they shared in the context

⁵ Laihonen, Maarit. *Political foreplay for nuclear new build*. (Aalto University publication series, Doctoral dissertations 247/2016).

⁶ Vehkalahti, Pertti. 2017. *Pohjoisen ydinmylly. Julkinen keskustelu Fennovoiman ydinvoimalasta 2007-2013*. Academic dissertation. (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2017).

⁷ I have published an article discussing the same material, focusing on the narrative/doxa of the Finnish nuclear discussion: Lounasmeri, Lotta. "Building New Nuclear in Finland: Crises Challenging Core Beliefs around Nuclear Energy." *Journal of Energy and Power Technology* 4.2 (2022): 1-1. DOI:10.21926/jept.2202012.

of Fennovoima: Did they have a common narrative that mediated their values and attitudes? Did they acknowledge how their beliefs affected their decisions and the following consequences? To gain an active citizen's perspective on decision-making, I also interviewed those who were opposed to building the nuclear power plant. How did they relate to the beliefs represented by this nuclear decision-making? Nuclear power has long been a divisive issue in Finland. If you are in favour, you will be counted in the pragmatic, level-headed camp; if you are against, you will likely be regarded as passionate and ideologically driven, maybe even a fanatic naysayer. Among the elites, there has long existed an adequate or even strong consensus on the use of nuclear energy. However, surveys have shown that many Finns still hesitate.

The interviews brought to light a system or construct of beliefs that I see as layered. The modern part of this construct pays allegiance to natural science and technology, markets and profit. This thin layer, however, covers a premodern that still affects how culture and community function. This older part draws from an archaic tribal society where trust is intuitive and where the system of decision-making is based on spheres of interest, chiefs driving operations and knowing each other, instinctively. This system of beliefs, as it turned out, proved rather rigid, and as such difficult to question. It can aptly be described as *doxa*: it is based primarily on a common faith delivered from an authority above, rather than on trust that has been consciously tried and tested in one's own heart. That which is unconscious cannot represent the same authenticity as the original true values. Both the worlds of *Ilmarinen* and *Väinämöinen* are present in the Finnish way of doing things. So the question becomes, how do they figure in today's decision-making in the community.

The energy question at the heart of society

What made me choose energy as the lens through which to examine the Finnish culture of trust and the accompanying belief system? Energy is an extremely important part of public decision-making, both concretely and symbolically, and energy policy is a key strategic sector that affects the welfare of the whole community at multiple levels. It drives every wheel and gives us light, warmth, food, material good. It moves us and helps us keep in touch with each other. Energy is fundamental to our existence and survival. Who controls energy has become a particularly pressing question today. Indeed, at a deeper level, energy issues, as many other societal issues in Finland, are often regarded by decision-makers as matters of security.

Until very recently, energy policy has represented a sector where changes are slow to happen, not only in Finland but also internationally. This is largely attributable to society's organizations and ways of thinking that have evolved and become established over long periods. Another reason lies in the scale of investments required, which has made it harder for new players to break into the marketplace. However, pressures of change are mounting. This has mostly been a result of outside events: environmental problems and disasters and the associated collective, international agreements. Other crises such as nuclear accidents have also affected regulation.⁸

National energy policy in Finland is directly affected by EU climate policy and renewable energy objectives. Growing instability in the international energy markets has drawn ever greater attention to questions of self-sufficiency and security of supply. Since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, European energy dependence on Russia has become a question of increasing geopolitical interest, a question that is particularly pressing in Finland. All these factors have come together to change the energy equation: mounting pressures to abandon fossil energy sources, the need to increase energy self-sufficiency and at the same time secure access to inexpensive energy and satisfy industrial energy demand. For many years now, consensus within the Finnish energy elite has continued to build.⁹ Today, questions of security and survival are gaining ever greater prominence.

Unfolding the story

The story I am recounting revolves around a particular time and place, and even at the time of writing in 2022 it seems to be telling a tale of times gone by. For me as a researcher, as I seek to explain the surrounding reality, it is only possible to capture a moment. In that moment, certain historical foundations and bonds come together with people and their beliefs and expectations for the future. Even now, the situation may appear different and culture has assumed new colours as younger generations take the lead in societal decision-making. However, understanding history is important to them as well, as it is to all of us. Also, the times of crisis we are facing as

⁸ Litmanen, Tapio. "The Temporary Nature of Societal Risk Evaluation: Understanding the Finnish Nuclear Decisions". In *The Renewal of Nuclear Power in Finland*, edited by Kojo, Matti and Litmanen, Tapio, 192–217. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁹ Ruostetsaari, Ilkka. *Energiavalta. Eliitti ja kansalaiset muuttuvilla energiemarkkinoilla*. (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2010), 255.

a global community might well bring to surface the archaic sediments of culture even more prominently.

I lay the groundwork for Fennovoima's story by picturing a cultural and historical context: by constructing an image of Finnish history from the viewpoint of social trust, I also try to construct an understanding of what I call Finnishness. As the significance of trust and belief lies at the core of this book, I first discuss what trust between people actually is. I also reveal what it was like to interview societal actors and members of the elite, trying to find common ground and that trust. These sections are intended for readers who wish to gain a deeper understanding of social trust.

The actual events around Fennovoima are presented in several phases. To begin with, we find a new company which was founded as a historical agreement around energy issues no longer seemed to work and trust was damaged. No cheap energy was available to all the national actors who wanted it. In the next part, I recount how a new community was founded around Fennovoima, committed to solve the energy issue. In the third part, Fennovoima faces crises as the external conditions and internal reactions mount to trouble and the company is surrounded by growing distrust. In the end, I describe in detail the belief system, its elements and relationship with the decision-making system: a modern democracy.

To conclude the book, I discuss what this all means. Ultimately, the question I set out to answer is this: Why do we do things the way we do in Finland? Could I perhaps find those elusive customs and practices that made up the nation's "customary law"? The social scientist's role is to try and understand and explain our collective being in a political community, its history and laws, its structures and agencies. Something, it seems, has been missing from the way we explain ourselves. In order to study trust between people it is not enough to depend on reason alone. We must also follow our heart and intuition. This might even help the reader connect with the researcher, appreciate why it is important for us to spend so much time and effort trying to understand this Finnish phenomenon.

The story of Finland's nuclear decision is one, local narrative, but it no doubt also describes distinctive features of human political communities that could just as well be seen in democracies, tribal societies, monarchies and autocracies. The distinctive circumstances in each case do leave their mark, but humans are typically pack animals who want to ensure their own safety and material welfare, and at the same time to look after their own to make sure that they are not left out but can always belong. The story also

tells us something about a community's decision-making system: in a democracy, one of its roles is to ensure adequate control over the exercise of power. For the system to adhere to its true values, those in power should respect its true purpose. Also, citizens should have the courage to think that they matter, that their views matter. Otherwise, one might find rust around the core.

CHAPTER 1

THE CULTURAL RULES OF TRUST

The material and immaterial forces holding a community together

A happy and functional, humane society can never be based on material values alone. Western philosophical and social thinking has wrestled between materialistic and idealistic worldviews for millennia. For a long time, materialistic and rationalistic thinking has had the upper hand. This has allowed people to base their sense of security on something concrete and tangible, something that is grounded in the human world. An idealistic understanding of the world, by contrast, is more abstract and harder to visualize, and is often rejected because it is more difficult to control and perhaps to grasp.

However, if we consider a human community and a politically organized society more generally, every society is also grounded in ideas; every society is a moral society. French sociologist Émile Durkheim took the view that social harmony could never come from individual rationality alone, but it also requires values and a sense of community.¹⁰ Along these lines, I believe that unless society and its dominant culture are based on profound values of respect for humanity and a sense of something greater than the self, something sacred, if they are grounded in nothing other than materialistic values, this will inevitably cause pain and suffering. This can manifest in apathy and ignorance, in the worst-case conflicts, as people struggle to understand themselves and those around them. The same will happen when contact is lost between the decision-makers in society and the people affected by their decisions.

In the case of Finland, we can explore this question through metaphors. *Kalevala's Väinämöinen*, the carrier of age-old wisdom, symbolizes the

¹⁰ Durkheim, Emile. *Education and Sociology*. Translated from the French *Education Et Sociologie* by Sherwood D. Fox. (New York: The Free Press, a Division of MacMillan Inc, 1956).

world of ideas, whereas *Ilmarinen*, the forger of concrete things, symbolizes ideas materializing into technical realizations. The philosopher and father of Finnish statesmanship, J.V. Snellman (1806-1881) saw in his time that ancient Finnish faith was the source of Finnish sovereignty and self-esteem and the root of the people's vitality. The crucial question, then, concerns the balance between these heroes of the *Kalevala*: what is the role of immaterial and material values and beliefs in today's Finnish society and what are they based on?

Researching human culture: on methodology

A community that is organized on the principles and structures of democracy deserves to be studied from a cultural vantage point. This may involve sociological, social-psychological and anthropological analysis, complementing rational investigation by an examination of the meaning of values, emotions, solidarity, social ties and loyalties. The focus shifts from systems and structures to humans as social beings and actors. Human existence can be studied via different kinds of symbols, rules, norms, attitudes and beliefs.¹¹

The anthropological approach starts out from the specific, the local and the here and now. Social scientists typically proceed from the general level or the systemic framework, applying its presumed laws to specific local environments and individual cases. In the best case, an anthropological approach can combine a more general political and economic framework with a detailed cultural analysis. The starting point for anthropology is empirical "field experience".¹² I set out to search for this empirical field experience by talking to people who in one way or another were or had been involved in decision-making. What was it that made them trust, move forward, and cooperate? And what could I find in this case that might have more general applicability in the Finnish context or more widely?

For research to be valid and reliable, it is commonplace to think that it should be replicable in identical conditions and that another researcher

¹¹ This approach is represented, among others, by Émile Durkheim (1956), George H. Mead (1964), Talcott Parsons (1937), Pierre Bourdieu (*habitus*) (1977) and Jeffrey Alexander (polarized discourses), Alexander and Smith (1993), Robert D. Putnam (social capital) (1995, 664–665) and Piotr Sztompka (*trust*) (1999).

¹² See Watson, C.W. "The changing nature of elites in Indonesia today". In *Elite Cultures: Anthropological perspectives*, edited by Shore, Chris and Nugent, Stephen, 110-126. (Routledge: London and New York, 2002), 123.

should be able to get the exact same results. In the human sciences, however, this is an awkward premise. As Behar¹³ observes, the anthropologist's conversations and interactions in the field can never again be exactly reproduced because like all encounters between people, they are unique. Proof of the anthropologist's "journey of exploration" comes in the form of an ethnography whose value lies in what others can learn from the account that is meaningful and identifiable. As the old story of a group of blind people feeling an elephant tells us, their descriptions of the animal they have never come across before will differ from each other, but all versions are equally true and accurate. The same goes for the ethnographer and anthropologist: they can open a window onto Finnishness, offering one interpretation of what the essence of Finnishness is all about.

The historical roots of anthropology lie in European colonialism and its impulse to know "others" in order to better rule them or, even worse, in Western fantasies about barbaric others.¹⁴ Later on, the "natives" became anthropologists of themselves, using the language of science for purposes of self-analysis and interpretation. In a sense this is what I'm trying to do here: to turn the gaze back on my own community in order to examine it as an outsider, yet at the same time as a member of the community. In a way I even feel at home with the idea that Finnish people are the barbarians who should turn the gaze back on themselves in order to achieve a better understanding of who they are—a more honest, appreciative and compassionate understanding.

Anthropology and ethnography are about witnessing, about being present, which inevitably influences what happens in the moment and how it is interpreted. As this particular ethnography is focused on my fellow human beings, on other Finnish people, it is quite challenging for me, in my role as witness, to represent their point of view without "going native", to keep an arm's length.¹⁵ I was an outsider or different vis-à-vis my interviewees in several ways: through differing power positions, through belonging or not belonging in inner and outer circles, through differing fields of expertise, through age and gender.

¹³ Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 7.

¹⁴ Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 4,26.

¹⁵ Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 5.

Anthropologists often experience a sense of anxiety that comes from the imbalance and the structures of power that are present when they are interviewing “natives”. These people are individual representatives of their culture whose “only” contribution is to tell their personal life-story, which anthropologists then incorporate in their own, expert analysis in the manner they best see fit. When one is interviewing people in positions of power, the setting is reversed. This research gave me the opportunity to gain a peek into those positions of power, to walk along the corridors of power and to breathe the atmosphere where my fellow human beings were going about their decision-making. The circles of power are many and varied—in this study they were national and local, big and small players in the energy field. Most of my interviewees held positions of power in society, which is not to say that I was completely devoid of power: I could fall back on the authority of my degree, and university and academia at large. Academia constitutes a field of power in its own right (even if it has been stripped of a lot of its independence), and the informants might have seen the potential influence of research. In Finland, despite the public debate on the position and relevance of universities, elites in society still hold academia in high respect, this being the old tradition. The Norwegian scholar Tine Figenschou noted that in her research, she could be perceived as having power to influence the public image of her research subjects.¹⁶ Similarly, I experienced that looking into critical, strategic and taboo subjects aroused the informants’ interest in varied ways.

Nevertheless, as I trained my researcher’s gaze on these decision-makers, they still had substantial power to decide how they would let themselves be examined, and of course they were highly experienced in controlling human interactions. This led me to feel both power and powerlessness: a sense of powerlessness as many declined either to be interviewed at all or only shared limited information; self-reflection on one’s sense of responsibility—how would I guarantee the anonymity of my interviewees but at the same time tell the story that needs to be told; and feelings of ignorance as I didn’t know enough to engage in an in-depth discussion about nuclear technology or the details of the legislative process; but at the same time a sense of dignity. These were not my actual research subjects and therefore I didn’t want to spend too much time with them. I also understood that my lack of expertise in these matters could also be an advantage, as my respondents did not

¹⁶ Figenschou, Tine. 2010. “Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: Critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies”. *Media, Culture & Society* 32 (6), 2010: 961–978. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710379667>, 974.

consider me too “dangerous”. Occasionally I also felt a sense of being very small, having this opportunity to take a sneak peek into the chambers of power—and within the hour I was back on the street again.

I also interviewed people who felt powerless themselves, who had no power resources associated with position, people who tried to lobby against the building of a new nuclear power plant. How could I give a balanced representation of their viewpoints, and how could I protect them so as not to add to the troubles and difficulties they had reported. The researcher herself has to make the final decision on what is necessary in order to get the story told and carry the consequences. In each case, my aspiration was to build trust in those brief moments so that I could better understand Fennovoima and the people around it.

Interaction and building trust in interview research¹⁷

Examining the powerful in society is no easy task, but it is essential if we are to understand how they affect the way that any community takes shape and follows a certain path. Recent decades have seen increased interest in elite interviewing and growing literature on the dilemmas of interviewing elites within the social sciences.¹⁸ The ethnographic approach, too, places emphasis on understanding human interaction as part of the research process. At the heart of elite interviewing, as my personal example shows, are questions of power and power imbalances. The negotiation of status and power is relevant to all research relationships, and an open, systematic approach to these challenges is necessary in order to enhance the quality of research interviews.¹⁹ Knowledge is created in the constructive process between interviewer and interviewee, and power is always an aspect of this process. These interview interactions offered me a vast amount of material to analyse as a researcher of societal power.

¹⁷ Some of this discussion has been presented in my article Lounasmeri, Lotta. “Elite interviewing. The effects of power in interactions. The experiences of a northern woman”. In *Challenges and Solutions in Ethnographic Research. Ethnography with a Twist*, edited by Lähdesmäki, Tuuli; Koskinen-Koivisto, Eerika; Čeginskas, Viktorija L.A. and Koistinen Aino-Kaisa, 146-158. (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁸ Djerf-Pierre, Monika. “Lonely at the top: Gendered media elites in Sweden”. *Journalism* 6(3), 2005: 265–290.

¹⁹ Figschou, Tine. 2010. “Young, female, Western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: Critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies”. *Media, Culture & Society* 32 (6), 2010: 961–978.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710379667>, 974.

Doing an interview study—both the interview situations and the whole research process—will ignite a whole host of emotions in the researcher. It is hard to remain cool and detached if the purpose of the research is to uncover people's motives, hopes and fears. Indeed, in this case it would have been impossible: the interviews with people in positions of power initially filled me with a sense of dread and fear so intense that there was no point trying to project the role of a disinterested, professional researcher. There was no option but to surrender, albeit with dignity: to be vulnerable, to take the risk that the interviewee would think I was ignorant or disingenuous, wonder what purpose this interview could possibly serve. However, as Behar writes, if you communicate vulnerably, there is a good chance others may respond vulnerably, abandon their professional cool. But they might also retreat even further into their shell.

Emotions as part of interaction

When I was doing the Fennovoima interviews, I was on culturally familiar ground in terms of nationality. Interviewing people who share the same cultural and ethnic background is easy in the sense that both parties have tacit and shared knowledge on a range of subjects and can use their mother tongue to discuss issues. Accordingly, as a Finnish person, I found it rather uncomplicated to approach these interviews with fellow Finns as social situations. One downside was the risk of taking things for granted. Finland, one of the Nordic countries, is characterized by high gender equality and low hierarchies, allowing easier access to those in powerful positions. Different kinds of power hierarchies nonetheless came into play in the interviews: hierarchies between different fields of society, between societal positions and, as I came to experience, between genders. In addition to formal hierarchies or group identities, personal characteristics and emotions also played a role.

Part of the reason I experienced feelings of fear had to do with the fact that I was a female social scientist doing qualitative research, while most of my interviewees were male, trained in natural sciences or engineering, and at the highest echelons of society. That the gender perspective surfaced as part of the power setting came as a bit of surprise, but it could not be eluded. The role of masculinity in Finnish culture is an important theme in decision-making and I shall return to it in the conclusions.

Most of the interviewees strove to exert firm control over the interactions. My interest in critical, strategic and taboo subjects aroused the informants' interest and reactions in varied ways. They either wished to avoid scrutiny,

if possible, or to have their say and defend their case to influence how the issue was interpreted. Others wished to act as whistle-blowers, revealing certain grievances or abuses in society (usually after they had already exited certain circles of power).

Finding a common language was at times challenging, especially when the interviewees had different competences such as technical, engineering and natural sciences training. In many interviews with male respondents who were experts in different fields, I had to answer questions about my knowledge of the subject in question and try to steer the interviews towards the issues in which I was interested. This never happened with the female interviewees, even those who were engineers. Instead, they sometimes expressed interest in hearing about my field of expertise. It was typical of many interviews that the interviewee would cautiously try to figure out how much to share, what I already knew and what I didn't. The research topics in question might have been difficult—topics that the interviewees did not readily discuss because they often involved confidential and/or strategically important information. They might have also related to embarrassing details. The interviewees might have been concerned for their reputation or other consequences, or simply feared that they would lose face if it came out that they had made mistakes or were uninformed.

Establishing trust was consistently, if not always, easier with the female interviewees, perhaps because a certain kind of sisterly bonding occurred, if only on a professional level. The women would always bond as equals, with very few exceptions when they refused to do an interview altogether. The female interviewees might have behaved strategically, but they did not try to question my professionalism and capabilities as interviewer. With the male interviewees, the interaction and the balance of trust was negotiated differently. In fact, the male interviewees had more difficulty relating on only a professional level. Often, I sensed a need to control the situation, or to make an impression. They unconsciously adopted various roles: the older interviewees sometimes acted as father figures, younger ones would come out as charmers, and some would take the role of educator. But there were also occasions where I thought there was a genuine desire to connect—perhaps even between two equals. Gender was not the only element at play: the researcher sometimes represented something alien and even daunting, someone who perhaps might be able to see something that could unmask the interviewee as a vulnerable person.

A particular dilemma arises when the interviewer needs to make a distinction between when the informants are falling back on an official

discourse or institutional language and when they are lying. When a story has a strong, official version and a significantly different, unofficial version, the informants must invest much energy into putting up a show or a façade to convince the interviewer. The tell-tale signs are nervousness, arrogance and the behaviour of closing up and refusing to say much. The interviewees might be uncertain of their position, feel afraid for some reason or feel the need to show their power and position. Uncertainty might be caused by fears of admitting to making mistakes, not knowing or understanding everything and not trusting that the interviewer is benevolent or will side with the interviewee. The interviewees might be concerned that their motives will be misinterpreted or, worse, that their motives cannot stand the light of day. Such situations arose with some of my male interviewees, possibly because I attempted to make personal contact with them. Overall, the quality of the interactions did not affect the research process in straightforward ways. The male interviewees might have talked more and ended up telling more – willingly or unwillingly – than their female counterparts. Moreover, the male interviewees' reactions demonstrated which questions raised the most emotions.

At the root of fear

Another reason I feel it is important to describe these interviews in detail is because they remind us of the fact that human interaction always entails building trust. The intensity of fear I felt in many of these situations makes me wonder what emotions Jane and John Doe feel as they contemplate their relationship with societal power and power holders. What is the interactive relationship between the governed and the governors like? What kind of emotions are aroused by power?

Emotions have been a subject of interest to philosophers and anthropologists for centuries, and a discussion on the relevance of emotions to politics has been ongoing for decades.²⁰ As Sara Ahmed has stated, many researchers point out that emotions should not be seen merely as psychological states but also as social and cultural practices.²¹ Such claims have several implications. My emotion is not only mine but something collective that is

²⁰ Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd edition. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 2-19.

²¹ Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd edition. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 2-19.

born out of the community. It has a history; it comes to the surface in this very moment but is linked to past collective experiences.

I might spend much time contemplating what it is that evoked the emotions that I felt during the interviews, that I interpret as being connected to fear: shame, guilt, frustration, vulnerability, humiliation and anxiety, as well as anger. In the end, this question is difficult to answer, and it might suffice to understand that these feelings stem from the oppression experienced, especially of women by men—intensified by their powerful positions. This is a global history that exists in the collective, also in the Nordic countries and Finland. This is one point of view from which to look at fear, and it is essential to understand that as fear takes hold, it is much harder to build mutual trust. It is also harder to act as a sovereign person, as one among equals.

Interpreting the interviews

After the interviews came a new stage: writing up what was said and what it means. “Is there anything stranger than humans observing other humans in order to write about them!” It is easy to concur with Ruth Behar²² on this. Yet in order to understand ourselves and the community in which we live, it is difficult to see any other way. And in order to understand our observations, we also have to make known and be aware of what is happening in the observer.²³ So there is the desire to understand, but also the desire to effect change. By witnessing events around her, by observing and communicating about them, the researcher can almost serve as a therapeutic medium and so bring about transformation. In herself, in her objects of study, in her readers.

When the researcher becomes personally involved, when she writes herself into the text as part of the research process and the subject of research, she is also disrobed of her cloak of academic objectivity. This may be described as an autoethnographic approach.²⁴ In the end, no one can be entirely objective in their choice of subject-matter—and what does that mean anyway? We are humans and we are interested in subjects that concern us

²² Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 5.

²³ Devereux, George. *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*. (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), 6,84.

²⁴ Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.