



# A Proposition – Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and the Empirical Affect Montage

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## Abstract

This article discusses the potential of fieldworkers' affects and emotions as epistemic processes. It highlights fieldwork and ethnography as relational processes of encountering the so-called 'other' (i.e. the non-self) and focuses on the advantages of using emotion diaries as complementary technique of data construction in addition to data emerging from more conservative methods. In what is defined as *empirical affect montage*, I suggest to juxtapose ontologically different data sets (including the researcher's affects and emotions) when representing the experience, behaviour and talk of others.

**Keywords:** affect, emotion, ethnography, fieldwork, method

As an anthropologist working in interdisciplinary collaborations for almost 15 years, it strikes me that our disciplinary discussions about methodology, epistemology and academic writing seem to have little impact on debates in the wider arena of the social, behavioural and cultural sciences. This is surprising, given that longstanding debates in anthropology straddle the concerns of immersion, reflexivity, relationality, symbolism, ethics and representation of the 'other'. Anthropology's contributions to the studies of the human condition remain undisclosed, and isolated at best. Notwithstanding recurrent frustration

over the years when collaborating with psychologists, philosophers, sociologists and neuroscientists, and not feeling heard, this contribution engages in critical disciplinary *self*-reflection.

If anthropological practices of researching and writing are acknowledged within interdisciplinary and public debates of methodology and epistemology, it is predominantly restricted to one concept: 'ethnography'. Some anthropologists argue that the term 'ethnography' has been applied to such a variety of settings and scientific practices that "*ethnographic* [emphasis added] appears to be a modish substitute for qualitative, [and] offends every principle of proper, rigorous anthropological inquiry—including long-term and open-ended commitment, generous attentiveness, relational depth, and sensitivity to context" (Ingold, 2014, p. 384). Anthropologist Tim Ingold provocatively suggests giving up the term 'ethnographic' altogether, because its intellectual erosion no longer does justice "to the fieldwork in which these encounters take place, to the methods by which we prosecute it, or to the knowledge that grows therefrom. Indeed, to characterise encounters, fieldwork, methods and knowledge as ethnographic is positively misleading" (ibid., p. 385). I share Ingold's concerns, but instead of refuting the term, I intend to formulate a (pacifist and integrative) 'call to arms' that challenges anthropologists to better communicate what is at stake when they *do* ethnography, in a language that also speaks to non-anthropologists. Many colleagues

have defined ethnography in negative terms – it is *not* qualitative social science, it is *not* travel writing, it is *not* fiction, it is *not* science, it is *not* art. Others have highlighted its long-term and open-ended commitment that does not end with fieldwork, its ethical responsibility, participatory-observation mode, holistic attentiveness, or the ‘dilemma’ of simultaneously seeking affective immersion with and detachment from interlocutors and informants.

While building on this literature, I argue that the epistemological potential of researchers’ affects and emotions has been insufficiently discussed in empirical terms, and that its links to a systematic methodological heuristic have been overlooked. I hypothesise that enhanced emotional literacy and a methodology that takes ethnographers’ (this includes ethnographers from disciplines other than social and cultural anthropology) affects and emotions into account, assists in translating field experiences (observations, experiments, participations, conversations) into a language that speaks to those who have not “been there” (Hollan, 2008). The systematic methodological and epistemological focus on the affective dimensions of fieldwork practice fosters a transparent communication of ethnographers’ simultaneous immersion and detachment during field research encounters and, as I shall outline, positions anthropology back at the centre of transdisciplinary methodological and epistemological debates.

These heuristic aspirations gave incentive to design emotion diaries that assist fieldworkers in the systematic documentation of their affective experiences and hence extend the interpretation of fieldwork encounters and data to its affective dimensions. I propose an Empirical Affect Montage as a technique to bring the researchers’ affects and emotions in dialogue with more traditional accounts of the phenomena they study (e.g. field notes, interviews, memory protocols, transcripts, photographs, video, etc.). I propose emotion diaries as pragmatic aids to support fieldworkers in training their capacity to reflect and document affective experiences in the field. By offering a tangible device, I respond to earlier calls for fieldworkers to “becom[e] participants and observers not only in field relations but also in [their own] subjectivity” (Spencer,

2010, p. 20). I imagine that a systematic attention to the researcher’s affects and emotions promise a way out of the interdisciplinary deadlock anthropologists find themselves in when collaborating with disciplinary ‘others’.

### Rear View: The ‘Literary Turn’

Anthropologists have compellingly highlighted the inter-subjective dimension of ethnographic data and narrative. During the so-called *literary turn* of the 1980s, anthropology went through a cathartic ‘vale of tears’ where fieldworkers’ (post-)colonial complicity, ethnographic authority, and the *raison d’être* of ethnographic research were radically deconstructed. When compared to (experimental) psychology, sociology, political science or area studies, anthropology has celebrated this as a unique self-reflexive movement. The objectivity paradigm was rejected along with ethnographers’ authority over the production of data about society, culture and experience. Most of anthropology has since produced an academic regime of reflexive fieldworkers that cannot but produce “partial truths” (Clifford, 1986a) that reject even the slightest level of scientific abstraction and generalisation. Until recently, the discipline’s epistemology has been dominated by subsequent calls for ethnographic writing that is experimental, multi-vocal and polyphonic. In retrospect, the blurb on the back cover of the edited volume by James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture – The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), has set the trail for anthropology’s postmodern, postcolonial and post-structural epoch, wherein “Western writers no longer portray non-Western peoples with unchallenged authority” and “the process of cultural representation is now inescapably contingent, historical, and contestable”. The reverberations of this ‘*Writing Culture Debate*’ may have led to initial splits between followers and opponents, framed as ‘intellectual deliberation of colonialism’ versus ‘navel-gazing’. Yet, ethnographic fieldwork and writing has significantly changed in the aftermath. ‘Doorstep anthropology’, ‘anthropology at home’, ‘multi-sited research’, ‘urban anthropology’, and ‘science and technology studies’, to name just a few, have flourished over the

last decades. Obviously not just a consequence of this *literary turn*, the discipline's epistemology has changed fundamentally since the 1980s, due to significant shifts in globalised transnational communication, mobility and labour regimes.

## Positionality Reconsidered

Reflexive ethnographers agree that knowledge is always situated and positioned (Haraway, 1988). Renato Rosaldo's definition of 'positionality' may be one of the most cited terms in anthropological method chapters, when anthropologists describe their subjectivities vis-à-vis the persons and phenomena they study.

"The ethnographer, as a positioned subject, grasps certain human phenomena better than others. He or she occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision (...) The notion of position also refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight" (Rosaldo 1989 [1993], p. 15).

This classical definition hints at researchers' synchronic and diachronic double-bind that in my view applies to every scientific endeavour. It highlights the researcher's subject positions. Age, the social marginality of being an 'outsider' to the researched community, the hegemony of being affiliated with postcolonial regimes, gender and other contexts have a major impact on fieldwork encounters and the ways in which informants and interlocutors reveal their experiences and narratives. The *literary turn* has taught anthropologists that narratives, stories, and observations emerging from fieldwork are always 'particular' and 'partial' (Clifford, 1986a). This also relates to Jaan Valsiner's controversial statement that "as researchers, we are beggars for information". As such, they must constantly be juxtaposed with data constructed from other fieldwork and research encounters, by including various interlocutors' perspectives on a particular phenomenon, or drawing on other dimensions of data—an approach sociologists call 'methodological triangulation' (Rothbauer, 2008). Only after such long-term involvement can a retrospective detachment and critical deconstruction of biases be

achieved, so that scientifically grounded statements can be formulated and translated into a text. 'Positionality' has been extended to the discussion of fieldwork ethics and yet little attention has been paid to its affective dimension and how ethnographers deal with their ascribed positionalities in methodological terms. The psychoanalytical concepts of 'transference' and 'countertransference' remain persistent theoretical references in this field of discussion and so too do sociological discourses of research as relational or 'emotional labour'. I, however, choose a different pragmatic and practice-oriented path lying at the crossroads of these schools of thought.

Anthropologists such as James Davies (2010), Dimitrina Spencer (2010) and Maruška Svašek (2010) have paved my way by addressing the methodological significance of emotions as embodied social communicators between ethnographers and their interlocutors. They have set the path for inquiring into a practice-oriented emotional reflexivity that does not begin at our desks, but starts during ethnographers' encounters in the field and the ways these encounters affect them. Indeed, anthropology's disciplinary rationale calls for researchers to immerse themselves in others' lives and affectively relate to those life-worlds as empathetic and compassionate fieldworkers in their quest for 'data'. Only in so doing can anthropologists 'blend in' enough to grasp informants' ways of feeling-thinking, narrating and navigating through their local worlds. It therefore seems only logical to pay careful attention to these affective and emotional practices. Nevertheless, attempts to systematically attend to fieldworkers' affects and emotions have remained rare when compared to the abundance of critical discussions about ethnographies as partial, particular and positioned representations of the 'Other'. What *has* remained a powerful narrative within anthropology's emotional regime is that fieldworkers are expected to metamorphose into detached analytical scientists upon return to the academic site, where their emotions and immersions are transfigured as scientific disturbances in their attempts to translate witnessed lived experience of those they study into reliable and comprehensible scientific data. Since fieldwork produces positionalities that can be

particularly immersive and hence affective, a methodologically informed documentation of and reflection about researchers' affective and emotional positionalities promises to open up complementary and candid pathways to ethnographic (i.e. scientific) data construction.

## Emotion Diaries and the Empirical Affect Montage

I propose an extension of traditional epistemologies in the ultimate attempt to systematically juxtapose fieldworkers' affective experience with accounts of the lifeworlds of those with and about whom they study.

In a long-term study (between 2001 and 2015) conducted on the streets of Yogyakarta, Indonesia on the challenges faced by young men and associated affective practices during their coming of age, (Stodulka 2017a,b,c,d; 2015a,b; 2014), I made sense of street-related ways young men use to cope with scarce economic, material, and kinship resources through a close reading of my emotion diaries (Stodulka, Selim & Mattes, 2018) and subsequent juxtaposition with the analysed narratives of interlocutors and informants. Paying attention to affective experiences related to encounters with my interlocutors enabled me to foster valuable empirical and theoretical insights that led me to formulate the theory of 'emotional economy'. In a similar vein, fieldworkers' experience of embodied learning during and after fieldwork could be brought into dialogue with protagonists' and interlocutors' modes of relating to others in a variety of research contexts. Samia Dinkelaker, Ferdi Thajib and I suggest an "Empirical Affect Montage" that can be used as an epistemological technique to combine various data formats during analysis as a writing strategy that allows the author to selectively "put [herself] into the data" (Ghodsee, 2016, p. 23), or as a way to highlight particular aspects of field relationality.

There are manifold ways of incorporating researchers' affects and emotions through the Empirical Affect Montage. As suggested by the term, it opens up ways for fieldworkers to communicate what was 'at stake' in their multiple encounters with the local worlds of their protagonists to readers who have not

'been there'. Within an edited volume titled *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and Ethnography* (2019) that grew out of "The Researchers' Affect" project (2013-2018), 25 collaborating authors have engaged in empirical affect montages in a variety of ways. In this and other upcoming publications (Stodulka, Dinkelaker & Thajib, 2019a,b), we argue that the Empirical Affect Montage is an extension of traditional fieldwork methodologies, rather than a prescriptive compulsion that follows concise rules.

## Conclusion

I consider a methodological scrutiny of ethnographers' affects and emotions as epistemologically beneficial aids in the study of the human experience of others. If we agree that (ethnographic) data is positioned and hence relational, then ethnographers'/researchers' affects and emotions cannot be ignored. They call for systematic documentation, interpretation and representation. This means incorporating self-reflexive hermeneutic circles of interpretations and memories when 'writing up', as some experiences and emotions take time to be fully understood and articulated in written form. However, I argue for a systematic 'writing down' of affective experience at the time of the fieldwork/research encounters, since affective positionalities are best attended to during the fieldwork/research itself.

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