

# Unpacking Emotion Regimes in Teaching and Fieldwork: Introduction



Kelvin E. Y. Low and Noorman Abdullah

## Introduction

Do emotions matter? Is there an “anti-emotional culture” (Okely, this volume) in research, writing, teaching, and other academic regimes of professional conduct? Is the academic lack of attention to vulnerability an outcome of how these expressions have been posed as a nonproblem in pedagogy and fieldwork? What can we do as fieldworkers to stimulate a more emotionally aware academic and research milieu? Under the influence of institutional emotion regimes that underscore observer detachment and neutrality in fieldwork, emotions have been downplayed, if not disassociated, with expected modes of professional academic conduct. These regimes continue to place a premium on validity, objectivity, and credibility.

The three authors in this section problematize such hegemonic positions that are often sustained in various domains of academia. In their writings, they recognize and reflect upon the centrality of emotions and their associated links to identity, fieldwork conduct, and sociality. In different yet complementary ways, all three contributors consider the role, impact, and valence of “emotional labor” (Hochschild 1983; Lutz 2017; McQueeney and Lavelle 2017) and how this notion can be built into fieldwork and beyond, in pedagogical and other settings in the social sciences. More crucially, research, writing, and teaching methods need to critically engage with emotions and reinsert them into academic emotion regimes as part of the project of developing meaningful scholarship and pedagogy. Scholars who assume different and interconnected roles as researchers, instructors, and academic faculty members must both perform and carefully reflect on the emotional labor that is continually negotiated across a variety of scholarly domains and in relation to different interlocutors within and beyond the field. In this respect, deliberating on these

---

K. E. Y. Low (✉) · N. Abdullah

Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore  
e-mail: [kelvinlow@nus.edu.sg](mailto:kelvinlow@nus.edu.sg); [socnooa@nus.edu.sg](mailto:socnooa@nus.edu.sg)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

T. Stodulka et al. (eds.), *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and Ethnography*,  
Theory and History in the Human and Social Sciences,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20831-8\\_24](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20831-8_24)

281

issues unveils and acknowledges the epistemological value of emotions (Stodulka et al. 2019) in academia and other social domains.

A range of emotions abound in our profession, both as researchers in the field (Stodulka 2015) and as instructors in the classroom. The question is what we do with them, and how we navigate them. Instead of being displaced in the academe, the three contributors encourage such emotions to be reflexively incorporated in research and pedagogy in variegated ways. This is done to reconcile the analytical weight and sociocultural importance of emotions with what we do in the different spheres of intellectual engagement that we address below. By exercising such reflexivity, the authors here emphasize the pertinence of emotional labor as a resource in generating further analytical insights on researcher positionality, pedagogical training and institutional conduct.

Noorman Abdullah (this volume) calls for researchers to be “emotionally aware” in presenting their ethnographic analyses. Such awareness runs a gamut spanning vulnerability, emotional danger, discomfort, remorse, surprise, fear, and emotional stability. This nonexhaustive spectrum of emotions ought to form a part of the research epistemology of social science endeavors. Managing one’s emotions, as Strauss (this volume) and Abdullah point out, are part of the process of generating as well as analyzing data with the aim of knowledge production. In both chapters, the authors oscillate between emotional discomfort and awareness in the course of conceiving and conducting their respective research projects. Strauss is keenly aware of the gender divide in her research context and how that led to moments of discomfort. For Abdullah, episodes of studying spirit possession opened up emotional subjectivities between him and his respondents which required careful introspection and management of field relations. He also discusses the latent emotional impact that research can carry beyond the field and into the social circles of the researcher. Furthermore, he notes the expectations surrounding male researchers, who are supposed to be emotionally absent if not stoic in their roles as fieldworkers. Gender positionality is both divided and ascribed between the two sexes. In these various contexts, how do researchers maneuver between their emotional states and the extent to which they continue to participate in fieldwork and sociality? How far does one engage with emotional moments in the course of gathering data? What types of self-care strategies (DeLuca and Maddox 2016) do researchers have at their disposal when confronting these moments, so that emotional experiences and labor are not truncated and designated as individual failings on the part of the anthropologist (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017)? Emotional life, after all, is part and parcel of social life and fieldwork itself is a complex emotional undertaking (Lutz 2017). If anything, what is produced alongside the researcher’s range of emotions—fear, anxiety, distress, and vulnerability—is an empathy that lends nuance to our understanding of how others’ emotional lives are both studied and conveyed responsibly (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017).

Fieldwork encounters, as a result, became more dialogic, vicariously felt, and deeply understood as a consequence of our paying closer and more careful attention to emotions. These are the core arguments of the three chapters in this section, demonstrating analytical relevance and resonance across the different emotion regimes

prevailing in pedagogy, research, and academic institutions. Emotions do matter, so long as emotional involvement is carried out in careful concordance and calibration with the exercise of field reflexivity. Data generation and analysis can be further enriched by making the ethnographer and her emotional state of being visible, including feelings of discomfort (DeLuca and Maddox 2016). In sum, these chapters invite a rethinking of emotion regimes that have traditionally tempered parameters of objectivity and detached researcher positioning. Emotional epistemologies matter as they are variable, contextually determined, and impactful.

If emotions matter for fieldwork and the process of research and writing, then how does one harness emotional reflexivity in the classroom and its related pedagogical contexts? In Annika Strauss's attempt to accomplish this, she raises questions of embodiment, research ethics, emotions and self-reflexivity, emphasizing the salience of students' own emotions and subjectivities in the course of fieldwork as well as their post-fieldwork reflexivity. Strauss recruited students into a research project with refugees in Germany, where the former took on the role of volunteers; part of their fieldwork training included taking down notes which were later openly reflected upon. She emphasizes that engaging with such reflections among students required an empathetic approach, especially in order to unpack the sociopolitical aspects of classroom emotions, as well as to carve out a conducive learning environment. In the end, what was imparted to her students is the fact that fieldwork is most transformative when their embodied experiences can be taken into serious consideration. Further attempts are also made to sharpen their sensory and emotional cognizance, in order to connect their volunteer experience to fieldwork analysis more critically and productively. In a similar vein, Abdullah and Okely also recommend a closer look at emotional dispositions and management in teaching contexts and academic relationships, such as those between advisors and students, or among colleagues on a faculty. In order to carry out and fruitfully discuss "emotionally aware ethnography" (Abdullah), the emotional complexities and challenges researchers and teachers experience can be worked out across these different sets of social relations before, in the course of, and after fieldwork. As informal mentoring sessions, they respond to the stoic and positivist expectations of emotion regimes. These endeavors also counter-critically address how emotions, vulnerability, frustration and uncertainty are experienced and confronted in different measures. Recognizing the place of emotional labor, and exercising emotional reflexivity, can be both empowering and illuminating as it provides opportunities and possibilities for strengthening our analytical approaches, as well as complementing our teaching endeavors and helping to resolve the emotional experiences and reactions of both students and teachers. Thus, emotions should form an important part of fieldwork training and reflection.

In addition to these emotive dimensions, Strauss also points out the importance of embodied training for students. Drawing links between the body, the senses, and social status, Strauss engages her students in various embodied exercises comprising multiple calibrations of their walking styles, bodily postures and facial expressions. In so doing, she opens up discussions among her students on whether such embodied behaviors are similarly observed either among their informants or

themselves, and how such behavior resonates with their fieldwork experiences. Further connections are then established between such exercises and the theoretical and methodological literature. Judith Okely, in retrospect, recounts a spectrum of situations in which emotions and subjectivity have been dismissed as irrelevant or private over a range of institutional contexts. These also include authorship and writing style, doctoral supervision, and acts of reciprocity. Beginning with a critique of the Cartesian dualism as disembodied and how the dominant history of the social sciences is one of positivism, Okely makes a case for how the personal is enmeshed with the political. She suggests to researchers the imperative of departing from detachment and disengagement, proposing that “the fieldworker’s experiences stimulate emergent theories.” Emotions are no longer relegated to the private sphere of one’s experience, be it in the classroom, in the field, or in various interactional settings. Instead, they possess pertinent epistemological value. Emotions are reflected upon at the different levels of the self, the interactional, and the institutional. As an example, Okely draws on her own experience at a conference, where the debate centers on the question of whether individual presence is a complement or an obstacle to the scientific objectivity of fieldwork and analysis. The employment of the first person in academic writing is also deliberated upon. The fieldworker’s position and specificity, including her emotions, are subsequently re-inserted into Okely’s analysis. At the same time, she identifies what she calls “emotional drives,” including nostalgia, childhood experiences, and sensory impressions. These refer to how fieldworkers’ varied and individualized connections to the past organize and frame how research is approached.

Drawing upon one’s emotional biography is likewise an important theme for all three authors. They describe how such linkages to the past color and influence fieldwork encounters in the present. Such encounters include being positioned as insider or outsider, or being positioned vis-à-vis discomforting social realities in the field. Other examples involve emotional control or emotional outburst in situations in which researchers constantly have to calibrate their emotional conduct in the process of gathering data and maintaining researcher-respondent relations. Abdullah’s personal biography of experiencing death in the family due to spirit infliction became an impetus for his own research many years later. Such research is entangled with embodied experiences that are emotionally charged, challenging, as well as comprising vulnerable episodes in the course of fieldwork and in the social worlds which we inhabit and study. In Strauss’s case, she was aware of her position as a Western woman in the refugee camp, and understood that this slice of her identity, intersecting with being a female researcher, was foregrounded as a point of curiosity in the field. Paying attention to our own emotional and embodied biography is therefore a way to be sensitized to how such reflexivity adds to a richer comprehension not only of the people whom we study, but also of ourselves and our analyses (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017). The self is embodied, sensorial, positioned, intersubjective, and political. Efforts to carry out in-depth and honest ethnographic work can only be truly successful when one engages with the self, and when one acknowledges and constantly re-negotiates the multiple positionalities that are

taken up, for information is ‘always mediated through the self’ (DeLuca and Maddox 2016, p. 286).

Our emotional capacities—complex and multi-dimensional means of human communication—are the very foundation that makes social relations possible in the first place. In his *Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage* (Rosaldo 1989), Renato Rosaldo writes that he only came to appreciate the meaning of rage that emerged from grief, loss, and bereavement characterizing Ilongot headhunting after the sudden death of his wife and fellow anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, while both of them were in the field. In his candid and intellectually stimulating account, he recognizes the cultural and communicative force of emotions in fieldwork. This emphasis on emotions also reignited the methodological imperative to incorporate our emotional experiences as fieldworkers into the meaningful interpretation and writing of ‘our others.’

Emotions matter because they are resonant throughout and beyond the research and writing processes, as well as across a range of other academically related practices, interactions, and sociopolitical intersections. More crucially, they matter because they reflect and stem from individual behavior, the social, political, and economic, in a whole host of everyday life activities and tensions.

## References

- DeLuca, J. R., & Maddox, C. B. (2016). Tales from the ethnographic field: Navigating feelings of guilt and privilege in the research process. *Field Methods*, 28(3), 284–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X15611375>
- Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lutz, C. (2017). What matters. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32(2), 181–191. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.2.02>
- McQueeney, K., & Lavelle, K. (2017). Emotional labor in critical ethnographic work: In the field and behind the desk. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 46(1), 81–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241615602310>
- Rosaldo, R. (1989). *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Stodulka, T. (2015). Emotion work, ethnography and survival strategies on the streets of Yogyakarta. *Medical Anthropology*, 34(1), 84–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2014.916706>
- Stodulka, T., Dinkelaker, S., & Thajib, F. (2019). Fieldwork, ethnography and the empirical affect montage. In A. Kahl (Ed.), *Analyzing affective societies: Methods and methodologies* (pp. 279–295). London: Routledge.