Feelings in the Field

The Emotional Labour of the Ethnographer

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Abstract: Despite the recent theoretical debate over the importance of addressing emotions in fieldwork, most European undergraduate programmes in anthropology still lack methodology courses that specifically focus on the emotional impact of doing research. In this article, I draw from my research with activist parents of autistic children in Portugal to explore the affective dimensions of fieldwork experience. In particular, I give an account of how I have dwelled on the emotional challenges that I faced, how these have resulted in vehicles of understanding and affected the analysis of my work as an anthropologist. While fieldwork experience always entails unexpected and surprising emotional challenges, I argue that as anthropologists we can surely benefit from more tailored support networks, safer spaces for discussion, and better pastoral care.

Keywords: affective engagement, anthropology, emotions, ethnography, fieldwork, methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork has defined anthropology both as a discipline and practice (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). It is broadly conceived as that unique and irreplaceable rite of passage which will ultimately turn an apprentice anthropologist in a worthy representative of the 'real' anthropology community, and as such represents a cornerstone experience of our research journey as anthropologists (and as other social scientists too). A widespread emphasis on the fascinating aspects of fieldwork experience, however, has led anthropologists to overlook or shy away from discussing the emotional labour inherent in conducting research. As a consequence of this situation, we do not frequently describe or address the unexpected challenges and greatest endeavours that we face while being in the field. In previous decades, several anthropologists championed the need to reverse this long-standing habit of relegating the emotional experience of fieldwork to something private, personal and almost secret (Davies and Spencer 2010; Lindholm 2007). Consider, for instance, that feeling of epiphany in reading our fieldnotes and remembering the many difficult decisions, joyful moments, problematic encounters and different emotional states that we went through during our research. How much of this emotional labour comes to light in our academic writings? In addition to taking notes about the places, practices, behaviours and conversations we observe in the field (Mills et al. 2010), in the fieldnotes we describe our thoughts, questions, concerns and emotions (Emerson et al. 2011), capturing – sometimes in detail and extensively, other times in a haphazard and confusing way – the frankest picture of our field experience.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of emotions in understanding both our research practice and professional training as anthropologists. I have chosen to focus on three particular circumstances – parents' initial reluctance to take part in my research, my need to balance their demanding attention and emotional proximity, and my reaction to their call for me to engage in disability rights activism – to show how they have encouraged me to consider the affective implications of doing research and the importance of research training for early career scholars. My observations are introduced by some

Anthropology in Action, 28, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 8–17 © The Author(s)
ISSN 0967-201X (Print) ISSN 1752-2285 (Online)
doi:10.3167/aia.2021.280102

fieldnote excerpts, as I believe they are methodologically relevant for understanding the ethnographer's emotional experience. By recording my different emotional states, fieldnotes show the intricate ways in which my auto-reflexivity took place, prompting me to address the emotional challenges that I faced during fieldwork. I argue that confronting the emotional aspects of fieldwork elicits unexpected and creative strategies of coping, and represents a key starting point for the recognition of our emotional labour as ethnographers. The emotional involvement with the field, indeed, reveals to us the value and the hidden potentiality of being vulnerable within the context of participant observation.

In the following sections, I will concisely illustrate anthropology's theoretical debate over the affective dimensions of fieldwork. I will then explore some of the emotional issues that I have faced during my fieldwork in Portugal on the autism advocacy movement (Lo Bosco 2018). While I did encounter autistic children during the research I conducted,[1] they were not my primary interlocutors. My primary aim was to explore how parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) have become disability rights activists and act in support of autism advocacy. My fieldwork has relied on participant observation, face-to-face and online interactions, and in-depth interviews with 19 parents – 15 women and 4 men – at different points in time from January 2013 to February 2016. All my interlocutors were Portuguese citizens in their late 30s to early 40s, mainly hailing from the working-class and tertiary milieu. I met nine of them thanks to the intermediation of the Associação Portuguesa para as Perturbações do Desenvolvimento e Autismo (Portuguese Association for Developmental Disorders and Autism; APPDA). The other 10 parents belonged to different online autism advocacy groups. In addition to having been in contact through follow-up conversations and interactions via social media platforms, we also met in person during autism and advocacy-related activities (such as celebratory events, conferences, marches, parliamentary question periods, public gatherings and in-home discussions).[2]

Emotional Labour in Anthropology

According to Charles Lindholm (2007), anthropology has historically neglected the study of emotions because of their common association with feminine irrationality and sentimentality and because of the discipline's concern about the validity of participant observation as a method: 'For anthropologists seeking professional legitimacy in the sciences, a masculine meaning-centered and cerebral model of research naturally trumped any serious study of effeminate, irrational emotional states' (2007: 31). Feminist research has contributed to moving emotions from the margins and the extraordinary towards the centre, thereby influencing anthropology's viewpoint as well. Emotions have been interpreted as a form of embodied experience inextricably linked to our relational life (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990) and as culturally informed expressions of the self (Rosaldo 1984) within a variety of geographic and cultural settings (Lutz and White 1986; Milton and Svasek 2005). Anthropology scholarship has also acknowledged the methodological implications of emotions because they are a valid and powerful tool for understanding others. In this respect, Unni Wikan (1992) proposed an anthropology of the lived experience based on a person-centred and empathic approach, and suggested 'resonance' as a reliable way of knowing our research interlocutors on their own terms. As a matter of fact, the sensory and emotional relations that we experience during fieldwork have contributed enormously to the understanding of our subject of study and to the construction of our ethnography (Fraser and Puwar 2008). Emotions have an essential role in building our field relations, in shaping our knowledge of them, and in redesigning our research approach. In light of this situation, I consider fieldwork not merely as an activity done in a geographical space but rather as an aesthetic practice, that is, a practice in which we understand others through our senses and our emotional engagement. But what do emotions do to the ethnographer herself?

In her book *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (1996), anthropologist Ruth Behar argued about the need for anthropologists to embrace their own emotional involvement in fieldwork. Behar brilliantly debunked the false and conventional idea that scientific credibility implies a detached and neutral observer. From then on, anthropologists have addressed their personal emotional experiences as a form of meaningful knowledge (Davies and Spencer 2010), acknowledging the transformative potential of teaching anthropology when emotions are embraced amongst the strengths of its qualitative method (Spencer 2011). A very engaging scholarship has explored the role of researchers' emotions in making sense of the phenomena they study and for the analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic data (Stodulka 2015; Stodulka et al. 2019). These works show how the ethnographic en-

counter is an inherent relational practice that inevitably arouses and is imbued with manifold affective dimensions. Students and early career scholars have largely discussed the importance of identifying how their own positionalities, biases and emotions impact the way they encounter and interact with their interlocutors in the field (Hovland 2007, 2009). Yet, the ethnographer's emotions are still excluded from the majority of methodological courses; they are treated with uncertainty and embarrassment, or are just silenced.

Do Not Take It for Granted: The Sense of Refusal

Saturday, 16 February 2013 [about a month after my fieldwork started]
I'm trying to talk with someone, but parents don't seem to be available; they say that they are fed-up with researchers' questions . . . they are annoyed at having another researcher around, that's what a mother said. I feel like they are not recognizing my role . . . and why does everyone seem so disturbed by the idea that I'm doing this [research] if I'm neither a mom nor a relative [of an autistic autistic person]? They are asking 'how did it come to your mind if you have nothing to do with it?' . . . Am I missing the mark just because I'm not a parent?

One of the main duties of the APPDA is to provide services to people diagnosed with ASDs. These include access to early diagnosis and therapeutic intervention, special education support when inclusive programmes in regular school are inadequate, adult training courses (thanks to a Centre for Occupational Activities with room for around 60 people) and social housing in residential units. The association is also committed to raising disability awareness, fostering autistic people's civil rights and giving support to their relatives. During the first month of my fieldwork at the APPDA, parents conveyed a certain 'saturation point' towards researchers. It was as if they could not take it anymore: 'We're sick of answering the questionnaires!' said Francisca, a young mother of a four-year-old boy, referring to some online questionnaires that the APPDA secretariat use to send to families at the request of medical students. Similarly, Leonor, a mother of a six-year-old boy, complained that the questions collected by child psychology students failed to capture her own personality. If it is true that each autistic child is unique because of their distinct set of difficulties and abilities, the same can be said for their parents: 'We're all parents, we're all activists but each of us in our own way', she said. I was so distressed by the reluctance of the parents to be my interlocutors and by how they judged my profession as an anthropologist that I started to doubt the feasibility of my fieldwork.

When I began my research in early 2013, there were no anthropological studies or theses on autism and disability advocacy in Portugal. Disability studies is considered to be an 'almost non-existent' field in the country (Fontes et al. 2014: 6), and among social scientists only sociologists have so far explored disability-related issues such as social exclusion, poverty and employment policies (see Salvado 2012 for a review). Autism research was mainly conducted by researchers coming from biomedical, psychological and educational sciences. So far, this has represented a global trend (Pellicano et al. 2014), but a different approach to autism has recently been advocated, one that promotes research about autistic people's self-defined needs and that addresses the issues which they and their allies face in society:

> We are entering a new era of autism research, an era characterised by a new commitment to equality of participation, an era in which the voices of those who participate in research in all kinds of ways will be listened to and taken seriously at every stage of the research process. (Pellicano et al. 2018: 83)

When I asked parents about the reasons for their lack of interest in being part of my network of interlocutors, they generally complained that they did not feel recognised by researchers as individuals with their own expertise about their children's symptoms, evolution and needs. Once I realised that I could rely on the distinctiveness of the anthropological approach to overcome the initial refusal of parents to participate in my research, a shift occurred. Addressing the reasons for their resistance gave me the opportunity to explain the distinctiveness of anthropology's qualitative methods, such as open-ended interviews and informal conversations, and to emphasise the importance of the ethnographic approach in giving attention to the individual. I therefore devoted the initial phase of my fieldwork entirely to building trust with the parents, especially to avoid reproducing a type of relationship that could be perceived by them as instrumental and unengaged. My explicit commitment to acknowledge their role as parents and especially their experience as disability activists was welcomed as proof of my willingness to cooperate in

a spirit of mutual trust, as well as to mitigate some of the existing tensions against, and doubts about, the figure of the academic researcher. Moreover, considering that parents – and especially mothers – devote a considerable part of their time to childcare, basic agreements such as scheduling a meeting or interview (even a few weeks in advance) seemed difficult to honour. This circumstance taught me the importance of incorporating a 'constant anticipation of contingency' into my know-how (Frederiksen 2008: 9). I have also used a diversified set of communication channels to adapt my data collection methods to the limited availability of parents for in-person meetings. The widespread use of Facebook inboxes, online chats, voicemails and text messages encouraged parents to engage in my research more readily and helped build a space for sharing through more impromptu conversations.

Parents were not only hesitant to have another researcher around but even sceptical about my interest in studying the autism advocacy community. As disability activists, parents look after their children, assuring and promoting their rights to healthcare, treatment and inclusive schooling, among other things. In light of this, they are familiar with disability legislation and often at the forefront of national initiatives demanding to address the social barriers, biased assumptions and harmful stereotypes facing people with disabilities. Advocacy gives parents the opportunity to be involved as active citizens in the broader disability rights movement, but along with pride and strength it also involves struggles and stress. On many occasions, the fact that I was a childless woman created an unpleasant tension, especially with mothers. I felt that expressions like 'only mothers know', 'I don't know if you can understand what I'm saying' and 'it's something you'll know when you've got a child' were creating a sense of distance between us as if mothers thought that I would not have been able to really understand what it meant to live with, take care of, and advocate for an autistic child. Mothers were constantly enquiring about the real motives behind my research in so far as I was neither a mother nor a relative of an autistic person. How could I prove to them that I was entitled to know about the movement? Was kinship a prerequisite for carrying out research on autism advocacy? Over time, being a woman – more than having or not having a child – proved to be a common starting point from which to build rapport, which sometimes gave way to a complex and tricky emotional closeness.

To Share: Dealing with Distancing and Emotional Closeness

Thursday, 12 June 2014
I'm supposed to be online only three or four hours a day and disconnect [from social networks] during the weekend, but it doesn't work, my fieldwork is kind of swallowing me up . . . today, I'm nervous because of the videos Laura sent me of her son Luis getting out of the shower and trying to dress by himself, and another one where he's completely devastated after an outburst . . . isn't it too intimate to share? It's too delicate! Should I define the limits of sharing? And what about Luis who knows nothing about all this?

Monday, 23 March 2015
[some days before the World Autism Awareness Day, 2 April]
I talked to C. and C. [my supervisors] because I think I need a break, I need to understand, I can't go on like this, I feel exhausted. I'm isolating myself from the parents, which is not so right, but they are soliciting me in a way that I can't handle emotionally. Am I being too sensitive? I should learn to be less porous; how can I become less porous?

Many activist parents are members of online forums and Facebook-based autism advocacy groups. These virtual communities represent mutual-support environments that provide parents with new communicative possibilities and political affordances (boyd 2010; Hine 2008). Parents use these online platforms especially for advocacy purposes, such as raising awareness on disability rights and promoting autism-related events and calls-to-action. I then conducted part of my research online[3] using participant observation, interviews and content analysis of the group's live interactions and communications. In some circumstances, online interactions with parents elicited some issues that I think are specific to the online realm of my fieldwork.

The first issue concerned the ON/OFF and the Anytime-Anywhere features of the Internet. I recall here a few side-effects of communicating online: a sudden Wi-Fi crash interrupting an intense conversation or disrupting the joy of a father sharing his child's school achievement made me and my interlocutors feel upset and frustrated. In contrast, the ability to be connected almost anytime/anywhere had some important implications for the way we felt in each other's presence. The perception of being constantly available to each other, for example, elicited

very different feelings ranging from reassurance to fatigue and exhaustion. This also influenced some aspects of the research pace itself, notably the process of getting in and out of the field. Since online ethnography challenges the clear geographical boundaries of the field of observation, I often found myself suddenly thrown into fieldwork just because one of my interlocutors reached me on my mobile phone, or because I received a notification about a discussion of a relevant topic within a virtual advocacy group.

A second issue had to do with the possibility of sharing videos – via phone or computer – which allowed my interlocutors to have a pervasive and widespread presence in my daily life. Although this circumstance allowed us to strengthen our relationship, it also led to an overwhelming degree of sharing. Laura, for example, one of the mothers with whom I am in contact to date, is an extrovert and a proactive woman, who from the beginning fearlessly shared with me her tough journey of being a mother of an autistic boy. João, who was five years old at the time of my research, is a non-verbal child who suffers meltdowns from being overwhelmed by sensory stimuli. Witnessing João's screams and lashing out was one of the most difficult episodes of my fieldwork. As Laura once said to me as I was leaving her house after a disruptive dinner: 'My son's autism is intriguing but it also hurts, and I want you to see both'. Laura kept sending me photos and videos of João struggling with his daily difficulties. Seeing him bite his hands and stiffen the muscles of his little body, becoming violent and dangerous to himself, made me sad, anxious and uncomfortable. Similarly, rejoicing at Laura's laughter at seeing her son serenely playing with his father or feeling proud of João's school achievements were equally significant moments of emotional contagion. Laura's story shows that our physical distance did not hinder our emotional closeness, nor did our virtual interactions turn into disembodied relationships (Costello et al. 2017).

During fieldwork, we and our interlocutors build an intimate and safe space moulded and nurtured by the materiality of our feelings and thoughts. In this space, we reinforce our relationship, strengthen our emotional ties and expand our mutual understanding. While this understanding gave my field experience a new outlook, it did not come without perils. Indeed, the degree of emotional closeness provided by video- and photo-sharing fostered unexpected levels of intimacy. In this respect, Ghassan Hage (2009) reflected on the emotional dimension of participant observation and argued that, even if by sharing certain emotions we get closer to our interlocutors, the method of participant observation has always required us to distance ourselves. The author called this specific emotional ambivalence generated by the ethnographic practice 'ethnographic vacillation' (2009: 61), something which has accompanied me throughout my research. Parents' involvement in childcare elicits a wide range of emotions, from apprehension and uncertainty to self-confidence, tenacity and courage. Because of the mutual trust and closeness gained over several months of acquaintance, many parents – like Laura – used to send me photos and videos of their autistic children's daily lives and personal experiences. Deborah Chambers (2013) described this phenomenon as 'mediated intimacy' and argued how new modes of social interaction and public display techniques that have been enabled by digital communication technologies have contributed to new experiences and meanings of intimacy, friendship and identity. I do believe that doing (online) fieldwork elicits intimate and intense degrees of sharing and that embracing this feature of doing research is part of the ethnographer's duty as a listener. At the same time, and whenever I deemed it necessary, I have also confessed to parents that I was having difficulties in emotionally dealing with what I thought was an oversharing of private content about their children, an issue defined (not without controversy) as 'sharenting' (Steinberg 2017). By facing this unexpected intense level of sharing, I finally recognised the importance of continually calibrating my own spectrum of emotions alongside my immersion in the field. It is, indeed, a strength of the ethnographic method to 'capture the complexity and ambivalence of feelings that the encounter with otherness brings about' (Hage 2009: 62). In light of this, bringing our emotional baggage into the field is a fundamental prerequisite for creating and expanding our understanding of our research object.

Taking a Position: The Role of Political Emotions

Wednesday, 3 December 2014
It's the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and I went with Irene to the meeting 'Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology' organised by the INR [the Portuguese National Institute of Rehabilitation]. During the coffee break, Irene seems like a magnet, every parent we were stumbling upon started chatting with her until we formed a circle . . . we talked about the event's theme and what initiatives we could organise to raise

awareness in a society that kept marginalizsng disabled people . . . I remember the red face and the trembling lips of a father venting against the government's deafness to parents' demands. He wants to gather a list of discrimination complaints, and he asked me to take part in this call to action by spreading the word to other parents I know and collecting their complaints.

The fieldnote above describes one of the ways in which advocate parents called me to take action or collaborate with them, as we both knew I could be of some help. In July of that same year, for instance, I had attended, with Irene, a one-day training course called 'Know How to Exercise Citizenship'. The course specifically aimed to help parents and educators deepen their knowledge of Article 5, Equality and Non-Discrimination, of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNGA 2006) and the Portuguese Non-Discrimination Law based on disability (Assembleia da República 2006) and to provide participants with the know-how to file a discrimination complaint. Irene explained to me that she was particularly interested in the subject after the principal of her son's school recommended enrolling him in a special school following other parents' complaints about her son allegedly 'disturbing his colleagues and the normal execution of lessons'. I decided to attend the course with her as I was getting to know about many cases of abuse, harassment and bullying suffered by autistic children in school, and parents often asked for my support when it came to submitting a formal complaint to the accredited institutions. Parents' exposure of their emotions has a political purpose: they permeate their words, motivate their thoughts and actions, and bolster their visibility in society. Our conversations about civic engagement, social justice and the need for a more inclusive society have sharpened my understanding of autism advocacy as a manifold of thoughts, aims and actions. Becoming a disability activist is not a natural consequence resulting from kinship (being a parent or relative of an autistic person), but is rather a process of learning grounded in a pedagogy that seeks to valorise diversity and transform unequal power structures.

The method of participant observation always entails involvement in people's lives. My positive response to parents' requests for me to take part in their calls to action or in spreading the news about advocacy meetings or calls via my acquaintance network offered a way to show my agreement with their viewpoints. An explicit political commitment to our interlocutors' claims or a clear statement about our political stance could prompt warnings about our research being closer to activism than real science. In this respect, I argue that while anthropology as an inherent 'activist approach' does not necessarily and automatically translate into activism (André-Johnson 2020), we do need to pay attention to our interlocutors' thoughts about and expectations of our role and positionality as social scientists. Considering my fieldwork, the initial diffidence of parents often gives way to a rich exchange, which can sometimes be emotionally overwhelming. I took on board the challenge of getting affectively and politically enmeshed with the disability issue by acknowledging the importance of positioning myself and responding to parents' requests for collaboration. I have critically acknowledged my 'ability privilege' (Wolbring 2014) as a researcher and as a citizen and interrogated my feeling of anxiety about having been so far unaffected by disability issues. Was that anxiety the result of me coming to terms with my foregoing indifference to the rights of people with disabilities and thus to what I felt as complicity with a society that continues to oppress and marginalise them by putting barriers to the achievement of their civil rights? Or – as Hage (2009) brilliantly wrote – was it 'a reflection of my position as an intellectual: someone who, by definition, is a passive person watching events unfold with no capacity to practically bring about any change to them' (2009: 74)?

By embracing my emotional attachment to my interlocutors' political claims, I refined my understanding of the impact and significance that emotions entail for the ethnographer's labour. Paying attention to parents' expectations about my own involvement with disability advocacy has been a way for me to prove that anthropology can actively contribute as a discipline to a deeper understanding of its research topics or even to a change of perspective on them. The relation of emotions and politics has already been explored by the so-called 'affective turn' perspective that, by borrowing Baruch Spinoza's notion of affect, considers emotions as forces changing one's capacity to act and think (Athanasiou et al. 2008; Clough 2007). This approach has allowed me to better understand the political value of emotions (Ahmed 2004) in parents' discourses and practices as advocates, as well as to recognise the 'epistemic value' of emotions for the ethnographic enterprise (Stodulka 2015). If advocacy means recognising and fighting against the dynamics of discrimination and oppression of marginalised populations, then I wanted to do my part as an anthropologist and contribute to understanding the persistence of school bullying, social and employ-

ment discrimination, stigma and infantilisation that people with disabilities still suffer in society, even if I knew that my work as an academic could not conflate with my interlocutors' fights and personal commitment with the autism cause. The emotional labour of fieldwork itself has broadened the range of my political concerns. In this sense, emotions are a tool for unveiling our own vulnerability and accounting for new ways of expressing ourselves. By capitalising on this exposure, we can throw a critical spotlight on our own affective realm and force ourselves to contemplate our present position as citizens with all of our flaws. When everything seems to have been laid bare, affectivity opens up a new perspective.

Embracing the Unexpected

In the introduction, I argued that the affective dimensions of fieldwork are still sketchily approached in anthropology's undergraduate programmes; for instance, methodology courses do not often address the implications of emotions in research and the researcher's emotional engagement with the field. Luckily there are some exceptions. The Scottish Training in Anthropological Research (STAR) consortium[4] founded in 2006 runs residential training courses in anthropology for postgraduate students and early career researchers and pairs pre- and post-fieldwork students so as to create spaces for talking about field experiences. Students and early career researchers have taken the initiative to open up the debate on this issue – see, for example, the special issue 'FieldworkSupport' in the *Anthropology Matters* journal (Hovland 2009) with an introduction authored by Amy Pollard (2009) where she addresses the difficulties that PhD anthropologists at three UK universities have faced during fieldwork and the challenges that their pre-fieldwork training has done little to prepare them for. Similarly, it is worth mentioning the recent line of anthropological research on emotion of the Berlin School of Affective Scholarship (Stodulka et al. 2018). At my institution, the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, my colleagues and I have the opportunity to attend a year-round Research Seminar in Anthropology where we talk about and share the difficulties we are encountering in our respective research endeavours.

Methodological courses should contemplate follow-up support (before, during and after fieldwork has started), collaborative workshops gathering together colleagues with different career paths (from pre- and post-fieldwork students to postdoctoral researchers and tenured academics) who are eager to share their fieldwork experiences and the strategies they have implemented to overcome the emotional issues they have faced. This scenario can certainly help academics to acquire more confidence and emotionally focussed coping skills. In addition, it is important to mention how most PhD students and early career scholars face short-term contracts and job insecurity in academia, which, beyond increasing uncertainty about the future, have a huge impact on emotional stress levels during research.[5] Better support for early career researchers will not prevent them from the unexpected, nor will it compromise the creative and unique potential of emotions in fieldwork. There is no kind of pre-field training that can make us 'safe' from emotions. The theory–practice divide is to some extent unresolvable: learning by doing is an irreplaceable step for the researcher's know-how. Instead of trying to tame this quality of fieldwork, we should accept these challenges and use them to question our ability to listen, interact and understand others. No matter how much we prepare, the moment we arrive in the field we will often feel unprepared. It is in this apparent paradox – on the one hand, the impossibility of being ready, and on the other, the ability of anthropology programmes to equip students for the affective dimensions and emotional impact of fieldwork experiences, to provide them with support networks, safe spaces for discussion, and better pastoral care from supervisors – that lies the most creative quality of fieldwork as a style of enquiry. In the end, we only come to understand our field when we emotionally engage with others – our research companions – and embrace the feelings of vulnerability and discomfort that this journey entails. Because of this particularity, fieldwork multiplies the possibility of the unexpected and proves to be an emotionally charged experience.

This relational nature of participant observation can also contribute to the broadening of the field of autism research by including intersubjectivity and emotional relationships as means of knowledge-gathering and collaboration. The subjectivity of research participants and the interactions and relationships between them and the researcher are often ignored or silenced in autism research dominated by scientific paradigms and notions of objectivity. In contrast, Des Fitzgerald (2013) has addressed the emotional narratives of neuroscientists working on the neurobiological causes of autism to highlight how research and laboratory practice involves strong

emotional engagement. Joseph Long (2020), for instance, has suggested how the use of anthropology and participant observation as a method can provide social care practitioners a means to inform their own professional practice as well as to engage with autistic people.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that, overall, the recent rethinking on the affective dimensions of fieldwork and on the epistemological value of the ethnographer's emotions (see Stodulka et al. 2019 for a review) has not yet been reflected in a concrete change in the way anthropologists are trained, showing the inadequacy of academia in providing methodology courses and workshops adapted to the long-term challenges of fieldwork. Despite some exceptions, most anthropology programmes still lack methodology courses that specifically focus on the emotional implications of doing research. If these challenges are not well acknowledged in academic training, newly trained anthropologists will consequently underestimate them when embarking on their fieldwork journeys. Drawing from my own research with activist parents who belong to the autism advocacy movement, I have explored here how fieldwork arouses feelings of doubt, uncertainty, hesitation and vulnerability, and have shown that embracing the affective dimensions of fieldwork can be a powerful means of engagement with people. Experiencing both the unexpected prompt to devise constructive strategies and the sometimes awful and contradictory emotions that come as a result is part of the ambivalence inherent in participant observation as a method: the pleasure and gratification that it produces are as salvific as the difficulties and failure that it brings.

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Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my research participants and their families for their generosity in sharing with me their lives and work. I wish to thank the editors of this special issue, Francesca Cancelliere and Ursula Probst, as well as *Anthropology in Action*'s editor Christine McCourt for their suggestions and support. I would like to thank my dear friend and colleague Simone Frangella for our thoughtful conversations and her encouraging comments on an early draft of this article. My research has received support from the Fundação Ciência e Tecnologia, Portugal [scholarship grant no. SFRH/BD/84969/2012].

Notes

1. Identity-first language (i.e. autistic person) – opposed to person-first language (i.e. person with autism) – is preferred by many autistic people, their relatives and their allies. In this article, I choose to use predominantly identity-first language (Kenny et al. 2015).
2. Research participants have given me explicit consent to use the content of face-to-face and social-media-based interactions and interviews; their participation was voluntary, and their names are pseudonymised to secure anonymity.
3. At the beginning of my netnography (Kozinets 2010), I created a new Facebook profile to protect the anonymity and privacy of both parents and their children. This 'academic' profile reports my real name, that I was an anthropologist working on autism advocacy and that I was enrolled in a PhD programme.
4. http://www.san.ed.ac.uk/research/research_training/scottish_training_in_anthropological_research_star.
5. In this text, I intentionally use the term 'early career scholars' instead of 'young scholars' as the latter often conceals paternalistic prejudices, forms of discrimination and precarious working conditions in academia. Due to both institutional power relations and the lack of a progressive career system, many scholars face a prolonged period of employment uncertainty. For recent graduates, the academic path is often marked by a chain of postdoctoral positions and short-term research grants or individual fellowships. As a result, while we struggle to broaden our research experience and build a publication record, this employment system grinds our future expectations into a time-consuming cycle of grant applications, which at best secures our income for

the next few years. Job insecurity and uncertainty, combined with the intense competition in the academic system, can undermine our collegiality and collaborative initiatives, leading to an individualistic approach to research that risks further worsening our mental and psychological distress. The impact that these precarious conditions have on anthropologists at the beginning of their careers is therefore enormous and directly interferes with the experience of fieldwork.

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