

12 Violent Experiences, Violent Practices Caring and Silence in Anthropology

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“Take care. This will be good data”, I heard from a senior scholar after writing them about several violent and dangerous incidents that occurred during my PhD-fieldwork. At the time, I did not question it. Neither the words “take care” without further advice following how to do that, nor the statement that these incidents are good data. Are they, though? Does the ethnographer’s close experience of violence, social suffering, and trauma lead to insights otherwise lost? What I know is that the advice and affirmation came from a good place with the best intentions in mind. I also know that hundreds of junior scholars have heard similar advice. And I know, that to take care and to be able to make sense of “good data” needs more than kind wishes.

In a nightly conversation over some beers at a conference, another senior scholar called anthropology the last front of true adventure. “It’s not politically correct, is it, to say so, but really, we like being a little Indiana Jones, don’t we?” Previously he had told a story about needing to escape a dangerous situation with guns involved. Other colleagues recalled situations where they needed to be evacuated because of earthquakes, the start of civil wars or “just” left earlier because they could not receive medical treatment, had received kidnapping threats or experienced sexual or physical violence. These stories, shared after a glass or two, were told to almost complete strangers who had, however, at least two things in common: They were anthropologists and they had been on longtime fieldwork.

Violent Experiences

Coming back from fieldwork, I was overloaded with teaching and family issues that needed to be resolved. I had researched the connection between oil sands extraction and settler colonialism in Northern Alberta, Canada. There was a striking imbalance between the promise of oil wealth and the poor living conditions in most Indigenous communities close to extraction sites. I was especially interested in ideas of masculinity and the meaning of home in the context of pollution and dispossession/displacement. As many other early career

scholars that come back from fieldwork, my life needed to be reorganized. I had no apartment to come back to, no childcare lined up, and no family close for support. My fellow researchers that all came back from fieldwork about the same time had experienced major events like the Ebola outbreak, serious health issues, a typhoon, and more, which made us incapable of supporting each other like we otherwise would have done.

One thing that most of us had in common was that while these events obviously had affected us, their impact on our lives was far less wide-reaching than it was for our interlocutors. We also shared that we were supposed to gain distance from the field and start the writing up phase. The first workshop where we should present our findings was up in three months' time, my midterm exam in five.

I had no distance. And I did not want any distance. Who were we, that we deserved distance? While we were distancing us and trying to make a career out of the “data” we had collected, the life of our interlocutors went on without their lost ones, without food and housing safety, with extreme pollution, or whatever we had been researching.

To be clear, not all anthropologists research marginalized groups or people living in extreme conditions. However, the close work with people on whatever topic also involves getting to know the dark sides of their life, which can be draining in all circumstances. Experiences of illness, violence, loss, death, or poverty is part of being human, and therefore also part of ethnographic work. These experiences are, however, unequal distributed and the chance for suffering several of these issues on a more frequent basis closely related to poverty or being marginalized through other factors.

Whenever I read theory, it felt empty and meaningless. Our seminars where we anthropologists explained the world to each other: empty and meaningless. The implicitness with which I and the mostly white, healthy, middle- and upper-class people in my surrounding expressed and accepted their wealth, safety, and health felt naïve, spoiled, and almost disgusting to me. It made me feel sick that I felt drained and overworked when I was healthy and had a great job.

One of the things I had learned during fieldwork was that most things do not end well. There is a car accident - everyone in the car will be dead. You finally get a job – you will have an accident, illness, or any other happening in your life that will make you lose it. Your child has a swimming accident - they will die before it reaches the hospital. You are drunk and have no ride home – you walk and freeze to death. A first responder recalled again and again how they were searching for a baby after a fatal car crash and the graphic description of how they finally found her body haunts me until today. A social worker talked in detail about

the suicide of a fourteen-year-old in their community and which impact it had on all of them. An Indigenous teenage girl went missing. Stories of sexual and physical abuse, loss, failure, and struggle were everywhere, and I had nothing else to offer than listening to them. There was also the more indirect violence, the grief when interlocutors told me that they could not drink fresh water when being on the land anymore due to pollution. When berry patches were destroyed or access to ancient graves denied. For Indigenous interlocutors, racism and discrimination was part of their everyday life; they met it while working in the oil sands, entering a shop, trying to find housing.

It was a multitiered, often invisible violence that was omnipresent in my interlocutor's life, normalized by its ubiquitous occurrence and in many cases without an obvious culprit. The cause of violence, capitalist and colonial relations, including environmental devastation that generated, upheld, and strengthened socio-economic inequality, precarity, and health disparities were hard to pinpoint while being in the middle of it. When I was exposed to violence myself, it was meaningless in comparison to what I knew others had lived through.

Of course, this perception overlooks all the things that do go well, it is black and white, and does not give justice to my interlocutor's agency, their life, or the place they call home. However, it is not completely incorrect either. The experience that there was rarely any help available and that one always had to expect the worst outcome depicts the everyday reality of many who belong to socio-economic marginalized groups.

When I was asked about my research, I did not know what to say. If I answered, it could happen that I almost screamed one history after the other into my conversation partner's face. I did not want to talk about it, it felt disgusting, especially if the other expressed empathy, it felt as if I claimed a trauma that was not mine. The usual reaction from other anthropologists was the advice to be professional, to distance myself emotionally, and to analyze it. I repeated the words "be professional" and "distance yourself" like a mantra, at the same time as I knew that I was not able to follow the advice. I had the stories of abuse, death, and injustice in my mind and in my dreams, and there was no way to just translate them into an academic work that would further my career. Additionally, many of my interlocutors had also become close friends, and our relationship was ongoing, so distancing myself from their life was not an option.

Further, I could not accept that my own experiences during fieldwork, had an impact on me. In comparison, they were nothing. The less I could handle all of this, the more worthless I felt. Then I failed my midterms. I had tried to postpone them due to the high teaching load and recurrent sicknesses of my daughter and myself, but was assured that this

was unnecessary as they were “unfailable”. So, I went, failed and had my sneaking suspicion confirmed on paper. I was a failure.

At this point, I felt exhausted beyond recovery, had nightmares or could not sleep at all, was unable to enjoy time with friends or family, and writing, something that I had loved all my life, felt impossible and meaningless. Living as a single parent without family support in an expensive city like Oslo and as a PhD-student with an expected high working-load added further to my already increased stress level.

Luckily, I would say, something changed gradually. The feelings of failure and shame turned into anger, and anger turned into rage. It was this rage that helped me to get through this time and that made me finish my PhD. However, there was no space for my rage, I was not brought up to respect rage as a force that could be in its place and not socialised into handling rage as a resource rather than a sign of weakness and something that was “wrong”. My upbringing, the social norms in Norway where I spent almost all of my adult life, Protestantism, or my gender (I am non-binary but usually get read as a woman) were most likely all contributing factors to my understanding of rage. It even took me years to identify that what I was feeling and what caused much of my behavior, *was* rage.

Sometimes the rage was misplaced, which caused even more feelings of failure, guilt, and shame. At the same time, rage made me find a voice, pushed me to read, write, and discuss. Rage brought me also to the point of sharing some of its causes with one of my supervisors and some of my fellow PhD-students. Surprisingly, at least for me, this led to their own breaking of their silence. The following support we both gave and received and my supervisors warm humour that helped me laugh away some of the rage, brought otherwise often missing emotional connections and gave me (us) tools to cope. The same rage allowed me to keep silent about the topics I did not want to share. While I am convinced that positionality and situated knowledge are key concepts for good research, rage helped me to feel comfortable to refuse to make myself vulnerable by writing about aspects I did not want to share. During fieldwork, I did not feel rage at all, and my interlocutors did almost never express rage, too, even in the face of utter injustice. One of the most common responses was silence. In the aftermath I wonder if this silence was an expression of powerlessness, pure exhaustion about the repeated experience of injustice/violence and its normalization, or a sign of strength. Maybe it was a combination of all of this. For me, rage came first when I was back at a supposedly safe place and when there was no space given to safely work through my experiences. However, rage is a violent emotion, and even though it was rage that made me

persevere, it also hurt me, and I am still working on making sense of it. Now that the rage has gone, I feel utterly exhausted, but also curious.

Violent emotions

Lately more and more anthropologists, most of them female and/or junior scholars, have started to share their experiences of violence and/or trauma and questioned our discipline's practices, imagineries, and ethics. With the use of Twitter, podcasts, and shorter written pieces published on either their personal or academic group blogs, they break the silence and demand a professional debate and changes in our discipline. In particular, the online movements and webpages #metooanthro, anthrodendum, and anthropod have become important sites of testimonies, conversations, and tool-sharing that challenge the status quo.

Greg Beckett starts his contribution to a blog series called *Trauma and Resilience*, curated by Beatriz Reyes-Foster and Rebecca Lester, in the following manner:

I don't remember when it happened, but at some point, I began to respond to questions about my research with a feeling of dread. I wanted to say that it was going badly, or that the research was good but the situation was horrible, that I was sad and angry and that many of my friends and informants in Haiti were in worse shape. Many of them were dead. I wanted to say all of that, but I didn't. I had come to think of fieldwork as something anthropologists were supposed to love doing, and I felt that if I dreaded going back there must be something wrong with me... I had internalized what might be one of the most self-destructive aspects of our discipline—the idea that fieldwork is a baptism by fire from which only the strong survive...It is only recently that I have come to think of my fieldwork experiences in the language of trauma (Beckett 2019, accentuation by author)

When I read this, I was struck by how much it resonated with me. Obviously, I felt very familiar with the silencing of oneself, the feelings of sadness and anger, and last, but not least, the internalization and the conviction that it was oneself that something was wrong with, not the situation. However, it was the last sentence that was stuck in my head: “only recently... I have come to think of my fieldwork experiences in the language of trauma”.

It had taken me a long time to acknowledge that having recurring nightmares, vivid violent images appearing out of nowhere, and a constant feeling of threat could not be explained by exhaustion and that they would not disappear by themselves. I slowly started to read up on trauma. However, it took me hideously long to connect the dots, and when I finally realized that I could apply what I read to myself, I felt too ashamed to make use of this

insight. Moreover, even though they are typical symptoms of trauma, I could not make sense of my feelings of anger and rage. I felt guilty and ashamed and did not understand how I had become such an angry person. I also had no concept of what either anger or rage actually meant, besides that they were socially unacceptable and something one should be able to have under control. Only now, four years after my return to Norway, that I have the long desired and rejected distance to both fieldwork and to my after-fieldwork-self, can I see that not only do I need to think of my fieldwork experiences in the language of trauma, I also need to think of my emotions post-fieldwork in the language of trauma. To think in the language of trauma means, at least for me, also to think in the language of emotions, something I needed to learn.

Allan Gibbard, while discussing western (American) morality, talks about anger and guilt as twin emotions and as tools for morality (1990, 126). He describes guilt as anger turned inward. Anger and guilt together shape morality as they are usually reactions to the subjective experience of injustice. Morality in return creates the norms that decide when these emotions are fitting and to which extend and in which intensity, they are appropriate (Flanagan 2018, xxiii). Guilt and anger are often accompanied or followed by shame, and therefore I would add shame as the third component – as the triplet to the emotions of anger and guilt - and suggest that these three emotions together constitute not only morality, but also rage under certain conditions.

If there is no space given to explore the causes for the triplet-emotions and through this space the possibility to address the underlying injustice or hurt, the emotion can become one entity without clear boundaries. How this entity expresses itself can change or be different for any person. One expression of it is rage. All the expressions have in common that they are characterized by loss. The content of this loss differs from situation to situation, it can for example be loss of trust (in oneself, in others, in a just system), loss of hope, loss of control, loss of motivation, loss of meaningful relations. Especially rage is driven by the feeling of powerlessness and loss of control, and the desperate need and attempt to reclaim what has been lost. Thinking through the meaning of emotions and reading about psychological, philosophical, and other theories connected to them helped me to look at my own emotions and to distinguish them from shame that had been clouding everything. It also allowed me to see emotions in a cultural, social, and political context instead of something private and individual.

Anne Bitsch theorizes her own emotions during fieldwork researching how rape is discussed and judged in court rooms as interactional effects and as socially and spatially constituted and constitutive. She shows how micro-politics in the field can be made visible

through autoethnography and an analysis of the researcher's emotions during fieldwork (2018a, 2). However, looking back, I had surprisingly little emotions I can recall during fieldwork. I could not allow them. They surfaced much later after I had come back to Oslo. Reading her work reminded me that my emotions could be more than an obstruction I needed to overcome. Sara Ahmed discusses that not only is the personal political, as the second wave of feminism famously claimed, it is also theoretical (2017, 10). However, this aspect is far from acknowledged or accepted in academic circles, and directly prevented by violent ideologies and practices that are part of anthropological habitus in many departments.

Violent practices

Bitsch is not the first researcher that has written about emotions IN the field, it is almost standard in feminist and queer theory-oriented research, where the researcher's emotions are an important part of their positionality. However, much less has been published about emotions POST-fieldwork and their role in ethnographic writing. Even the acknowledgement about the researcher's emotional struggle with processing violent experiences (including the secondary trauma that can come from listening to people recalling their own traumata) is in many academic settings stigmatized, and therefore silenced.

Beckett (2019), who I already quoted above, gives a possible explanation for this:

I don't know what they [fellow grad students/other anthropologists, author] would have said or done if I had spoken to them about my traumatic experiences. I imagine that they, too, have probably internalized the disciplinary hubris that casts the anthropologist as an intrepid hero, the same habitus that generated all those whispers and rumors about people who couldn't cut it in the field or that led fellow graduate students to clap me on the back and talk about all the "cred" I would have for working in a place like Haiti. So many of us have fallen for this cruelty that masquerades as intellectual rigor. It was a cultivated disposition at the University of Chicago, where I trained, and where the same hubris now drives a willful rejection of the very idea of trauma, trigger warnings, and safe spaces. In anthropology, this same hubris can lead to silencing or outright stigma about trauma and the related experiences of anxiety and depression, despite evidence of the high rates of mental health issues among graduate students.

Suffering is, according to Ahmed closely linked to being passive, "to be enacted upon" and to "the fear of emotionality, in which weakness is defined in terms of a tendency to be shaped by others" (2014 [2004],2). Suffering from PTSD, from depression, or from anxiety after fieldwork is, as Beckett shows against an anthropological habitus, the hubris of seeing anthropologists as above suffering, as able to detach on commando from fieldwork

experiences, and of being able to turn everything into “good data”, no matter the personal costs. These involves violent practices, like silencing or stigmatizing mental health conditions and accepting that some PhD-candidates are just “too weak” for the discipline, and through this justifying giving up on them and letting them alone with their experiences and their feelings of failure. I heard a professor saying that a student “just did not have it in him”, when said student discontinued first his fieldwork and then his degree. Maybe this student, like me, and like many others, did not want to disengage from the violence he had witnessed and turn it into an academic paper. Maybe he tried to stay with the feelings instead of suppressing them, and to unsilence the ongoing violence and the role western states and economic elites have in them and to un-forget how violence also extended to him as a researcher. And maybe this gave him the impression that there was no space for him in academia.

Bitsch (2018b) calls rage, anger, etc. the forbidden feelings in academia. She discusses how especially rage is seen as political and researchers that express rage as emotional. Bitsch continues with the observation that being described as emotional instead of its assumed opposite, namely analytical, leads to the dismissal of the person in question as a capable researcher and to the loss of the reputation to be a skilled academic. Especially women’s intellectual capability has for centuries been judged as being inferior to men because of their assumed emotionality (Campbell 1994). Emotionality was and is in several cases still seen as irrational, weak, or as a sign of mental illness. The former diagnosis of hysteria and the current one of emotional unstable personality disorder that are both over-proportional given to women and people that identify as non-binary are examples for the last assumption.

Antti Kauppinen sees rage as one form of anger, as part of the “anger family” of emotions, which includes, according to him, besides rage also core anger, resentment, and indignation. Kauppinen points out “that mature anger in its different forms involves the thought that someone intentionally or negligently failed to do what they were supposed to do” and therefore is responsible for violating a normative expectation (2018, 32).

However, if rage evolves from a mixture of anger, guilt, and shame, or from observing someone intentionally violating a normative expectation, then rage is not based on irrationality. According to Gibbard, anger results from a moral judgement that something is unjust and is both constituted by and constitutive to morality in our social and cultural context. Rage appears when this judgement is dismissed, stays unacknowledged, and therefore unresolved. It is a reaction to the silencing of the subjective experience of injustice, and the resulting anger from this act of silencing and therefore, in some contexts, appropriate. Reading up on the moral psychology of anger, I stumbled over the following

statement “It has been suggested that anger is a *destructive* emotion ... I am not terrible troubled by this description, because sometimes destruction is needed” (McBride III 2018, 9-10). If rage is needed to destruct violent practices that have been normalized in our discipline, then rage is not only a useful emotion, it is an emotion of caring.

Care

“Take care, this will be good data”. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, this is the reassurance and advice I got from one of a senior scholar. While it might be true that this was good data, as Bitsch (2018a and 2018b) and Ahmed (2017) among others show, good data is useless without providing the tools to both take care and to make sense of experiences of violence and suffering.

If the personal is theoretical (Ahmed 2017, 10), then grappling with the experienced and emotions caused by it can indeed lead to insights otherwise lost. Describing both emotions and their causes, if possible, is according to Ahmed more than just descriptive work, it is conceptual work. It can lead to the development of “sweaty concepts”, concepts that come out of “the description of a body that is not at home in the world, (...) of a bodily experience that is trying”. Through staying with the difficulty and by exploring this difficulty, the researched and/or experienced can be seen through a different angle, as sweaty concepts demand a reorientation of perception (Ahmed 2017, 13).

However, there is a backlash with this, as Aisha Sultan, Shoshannah Williams, and Helen Lee clearly point out in their conversation about the emotional impact of fieldwork: The danger that our work becomes more about us as researchers rather than our research and our research participants (Sultan 2019). It was partly the fear of this to happen that petrified me and kept me from both finding my voice and from writing.

Being unable to write after experiencing (secondary) trauma is a normal reaction. Losing one's voice and having trouble to remember are typical symptom, and as this, this should be acknowledged by facilitating for the time and support researcher's need to reverse it. The all-present advice “keep writing”, both when it comes to fieldnotes and afterwards can be useful for some, however, for others it can be impossible at the time being, and therefore directly harmful.

Kimberly Lewis, who was in a dangerous bus crash when doing fieldwork in Ecuador, recalls how fieldwork trauma impacted her dissertation work.

Years later, during the final phases of my dissertation fieldwork in Ecuador, I struggled to write about situations that recalled fear, violence, or shame. I often avoided writing at all. Ethnographers famously cling to their memories, running to bathroom stalls to jot notes. I instead spent long stretches of research longing to forget. My dreams became loops of crunching metal – a terrible kind of data to work with (Lewis 2019)

Helen Lee, too, recalls in a conversation in an episode of AnthroPod, with guest producer Aisha Sultan, the embodied experiences of fieldwork and how that impacted her even today, thirty years after her original fieldwork in Tonga:

I mean, I don't think it's a choice. I think you are going to have embodied reactions if you're fully engaged as a fieldworker. You are going to have those reactions, whether it's nightmares or I spent a lot of the time crying or being angry or crying and being angry at the same time. There's no way I could have *not* had those feelings and not being able to sleep, having bad dreams, all of those sorts of things. And a long time after fieldwork, not just during. A long time, and going through my fieldnotes in preparation for today brought a lot of that back... Thirty years ago and, when I look back on those field notes, it was as if I'd written them yesterday. The incidents that I was looking at were so vivid in my mind. I know exactly where I was, I know exactly where the other people I was writing about were. I can, it's completely burned into my brain. (Sultan 2019)

Acknowledging not only the emotional toll or trauma, but also how this toll expresses itself in everyday life through the inability to work, avoidance tactics, or outbursts of emotions like rage needs to be addressed. Beckett, Bitsch, Lester, Lewis, and others that talk and write publicly about the impacts that trauma or secondary trauma from fieldwork has on their work and on them personally open up a space that has not been there in academia before. It is an act of courage, and an act of fighting back prejudices and stigma that are cemented in academic disciplines that have a tradition for working ethnographically like anthropology, sociology, and criminology. Most of all, it is an act of academic care.

Care in an academic sense would mean teaching us how to write, how to find a balance between making theoretical use of our emotions and experiences without taking away the focus from the lived life of our interlocutors, and, not least, that it is okay not to write or to omit parts of fieldwork. Not to “eliminate the effort of labor” (Ahmed 2017, 13) without foregrounding this labor.

However, in order to being able to process any teaching, we do need other room and care. Room for exploring and displaying emotions, for healing, and for addressing the

violation, injustice, or loss in a safe space. Room and care can be given by, among other things, removing the stigma of asking for help. Normalizing the asking for and acceptance of care can for example happen through providing a mandatory debrief after fieldwork by someone who is not in a power relation to oneself and who is trained in trauma-sensitive work, an invention that many organizations that send their employees abroad already have in place. By making it mandatory for everyone coming back from fieldwork, no matter if the fieldwork was conducted “at home” or abroad, anthropology as a discipline would acknowledge that our work is - though luckily in most cases not traumatizing - always straining on a personal level.

Beckett argues that because of the central place of empathy, intimacy, and thick relationships in fieldwork settings, ethnography should be considered as a kind of care work. This view on ethnography opens up for reflecting more on how vicarious trauma might take hold as part of the emotional costs of fieldwork (2019). Being aware of the concept of vicarious (or secondary as it is also called) trauma, and how for example psychologists anticipate these costs by having regularly supervision sessions, could help destigmatize emotional reactions and prevent long-term psychological or physical reactions following the close exposure to other people’s traumatic experience.

Becoming a trauma-informed discipline

As said before, not all forms of or causes for trauma must be discussed in our ethnographic work. At the contrary, some silences and in general personal boundaries are healthy, and making oneself vulnerable, especially in an early-career state in order to achieve a certain ideal of positionality, might not only hurt the researcher but can also take away the focus from the actual topic of writing. While there should be space for writing about it, it is not what I see as the most crucial. For me, it is trauma informed teaching and supervising that needs to come in place, available resources, and cleaning up with stigmata and hurtful ideals of the anthropologist as the analytical and untouchable researcher that is never affected from what they are witnessing. Likewise, it is the recognition that silence, while protective in the right setting, can be as terrorizing as rage, and that systematic silencing of trauma is an act of violence.

While emotional reactions during fieldwork can be used as analytical tools to get a deeper understanding of our interlocutor’s reality and of relations and micro-politics in the field, emotional reactions post-fieldwork shine a light on the structures, micro-politics, values, and power relations in the researcher’s own reality, their discipline, and the society they

belong to. Reyes-Foster and Lester (2019) do exactly this with their series *Trauma and Resilience*, and they summarize their findings with the demand “that we recognize the fact that fieldwork can hurt, and that we have fostered a disciplinary culture where that hurt has been normalized and even celebrated”. Therefore, we need to prepare anthropologists before going to fieldwork by developing coping tools and identify resources for emergencies, anticipating that fieldwork can hurt before we do fieldwork. We need to discuss what we can do during fieldwork to support each other, and lastly, we need to create a disciplinary community and a habitus that supports researchers coming back from fieldwork, by different forms of solidarity, non-judgemental space for the expression of emotions, and trauma-awareness that can both help in handling traumatic experiences as a researcher and supports getting professional help (see also Beckett 2019 and Lewis 2019).

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