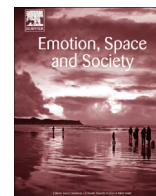




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## Embodiment and affect in research collaborations



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### ABSTRACT

This article communicates the emotional experiences of two researchers on a collaborative project. Drawing on our emotional journeys related to an inter-disciplinary research project, we present narratives and poems to reflect specific research moments. These moments reflect our embodied experiences and creative responses to our work, and the wider research project. In so doing, we use the theoretical tools of Bourdieu to reflect on how the fields of practice (and thus habitus) we each bring to a research project can have direct emotional consequences. Indeed, we suggest that being aware of our emotional responses can lead us toward a better understanding of how collaborations can cause tensions between fields of practice.

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*I (Katie) am watching the performers. Three women in dark coveralls make aggressive, militant movements; they flick their long dark hair forward over their heads and punch the air with their fists. Moving like angry mannequins, they divide the space, fighting as the wind blows their hair. They do not look at the audience scattered around the grass and walkways; instead they stalk away across the lawn, pulling the crowds' eyes with them, drawing an angry line.*

*I have a hard feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's difficult to put this feeling aside and talk with the people who are watching this dance work and asking about the project. Members of the public out on a Sunday with their kids approach us and want to know what we are doing, who the performers are, why we are here, what's going on. I feel removed, on the other side of that angry line, unable to connect.*

*Weeks later I'm sitting at my computer reflecting on this moment. I feel torn about my emotional response, wishing my experience of this research project was more positive. I feel a responsibility to my co-researchers to be more optimistic about what was achieved. The problem is, I left the project feeling bad and with a sense of failure, with a desire to put it behind me, a feeling of being left on the edge and in the dark. I'm conflicted, thinking such feelings aren't 'professional' but my body calls for me to acknowledge the emotional edge of the work, to speak about how research can become a site of exclusion.*

*(Alys) There was a year of meetings. There was the jubilation of a successful funding proposal and the wonder of having insight into the*

*brilliant ways that others think. And then a cutting and slicing of self confidence. And then distrusting my own voice. There was the shame of not knowing or not being able. There was the pleasure of having contributed to the creation of something new. And the way my voice gets stuck in my throat, the swallowy repression of words. And waking at 2am, jarring sentences cycling my brain, what could have been said, what I'm wishing for, what should have been, what I can and what I can't and what might be and what will not. There was the amazement at what we made, people inspired and engaged. There was learning about worlds of thinking outside my own. And the pride of having created a space for ideas to come into being. And the satisfaction that this work stretches outside of the frames of the university, into spaces I haven't even imagined. And a complex body of emotions – pride and regret, hope and cynicism, frustration and relief, celebration and shame – jostling in my body to define an experience that remains contradictory and multi-faceted.*

These two brief narratives, as written 'moments', set the scene for this article. We write here as a conversation between two members of the same research project. We will discuss our different emotional responses to participating in a large, interdisciplinary collaborative project and our experiences of the products and failures of that work. Our desire in writing this article is to foreground the emotional experiences we each had as researchers, and the affective feeling states that were produced by the disruptive and challenging elements of cross-disciplinary collaboration. This is where we will focus in this article, on the affective journeys of our bodies during different moments in the research. These kinds of experiences are not, of course, isolated to this particular project; we each have a multitude

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of circling and flowing emotions during every project we are involved in. Instead of describing the project in detail, we instead focus on particular research ‘moments’ when we became very aware of the affective responses of our bodies. We record, reflect and ruminate on these moments *via* poems and narratives and, later, analyses. Wetherell (2012: 85) argues that reflecting afterwards on moments of affect can be powerful. She suggests that “perhaps we ‘live’ not quite in the active chronological moment of the turn-by-turn, but most strongly and personally in the narratives ruminating on some outburst of affect after it has taken place”.

## 1. Background

Our project aimed to bring academic research on environmental sustainability specific to the city in which we live into the public eye through a series of art installations. It brought together artists, dancers, scientists (geomorphology and biology), educators and an architect in order to select relevant research, create new installations and performances (including a large-scale site specific dance work), and develop a plan to bring the work into school settings and to consider it from a pedagogical standpoint. It was highly ambitious and idealistic in its aims, in its timeline, and in our expectations of what could be produced with the funding available. The aims of this project were thus optimistic and multidimensional.

The uncertainty of the project was both exhilarating and frustrating for the writers of this article. This context is important because the research project took place at the intersection of disciplines and, as such, we (the writers) each had particular emotional investments in the outcomes of the research, from our own disciplinary perspectives. Because the project involved a team of people from different disciplinary backgrounds, the meanings of terms related to ontological and epistemological assumptions could never be taken for granted. Misunderstandings were common and, on reflection, should have been expected. Our levels of investment in our work, however, were deeply held and framed our affective journeys throughout the project. Understanding these as a form of embodiment that, in turn, reflects and reproduces our positioning in the academy as women, and as researchers committed to social change, is our aim here.

It’s important to note that we write here as individuals, not on behalf of the other members of the group. We reflect only on how our own emotions may have affected the research direction and our engagement with the project and each other. These emotions are communicated in narrative and poetry, which we hope evoke our embodied and lived experiences.

While using text here, we aim for these forms of writing to overcome, or at least subvert, the usual limits of academic texts to convey emotion and embodiment. In so doing, we reject the temptation to form a coherent research narrative about this project or to suggest there are definite ‘findings’. Writing, rather, from our own embodied and subjective positions, we aim to mine the emotional interface of research work in our lives. We use the poetic in this sense to engage with and represent the emotional (Barone, 2010). These are our own embodied emotions, as we experienced, lived and reflect on this project.

Wetherell (2012) observes that how the terms ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’ are used differs significantly across the sciences and social sciences. While discussion of emotion tends to draw on named emotions (anger, hate, jealousy etc), affect, rather, acknowledges that which comes before discourse. She employs the term ‘affective practice’ which she argues “focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life.” She explains that affect links with “shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations rather than simple lines of causation, character types and neat emotion categories” (4). Affect then reflects a shifting emotional landscape; how emotion is felt in

the body in ways that may not be immediately nameable or neat. In this article, we do at times name recognisable emotions in our narratives, but we also use a range of language to try to represent the less tangible, shifting and unnameable affective sensations of the body. We furthermore use our narratives to elucidate how emotional geographies of research intersect with the broader contexts in which we work in the academy. Such contexts often serve to obscure or discourage emotional expression. We attempt here then to name the hidden emotional work of research and explore how our own bodies are affected, sometimes viscerally, in research contexts.

This article is in four sections. Section one, *stories, poems and embodiment*, is an explanation of both the approach we take in co-writing this piece and the theoretical terrain informing this work. We then present and discuss two research moments. In *Moment one: Exclusion* Katie shares her embodied experience and reflects on the contexts informing her affective response. In *Moment two: The many sides of failure*, Alys explains how she lived tensions of success and failure and we both reflect on how such tensions can be both limiting and productive. The final section is a combined reflection on the potential for writing and theorising to address and engage directly with the affective in research.

### 1.1. Stories, poems and embodiment

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that we need to construct stories to live by. Indeed, that this is a fundamental part of being human. Using narrative can thus enable researchers to reflect on and understand how embodied responses can allow for re-interpretation of particular research moments. The research project at the heart of this article used dance as a means of story telling. The dance work communicated stories of water; some of the stories were angry, others gentle. Like all stories, the interpretation remained with the recipients (Denzin, 2008), not with the tellers (neither the dancers nor choreographers). In addition to the dance work, the project also involved a range of installations (one for story, one for film, one for scientific water testing). The former of these allowed members of the public, not only to listen to stories about water at a station with headphones, but also to ‘write back’ their own stories, to share their ideas about the theme on small postcards.

So while narrative forms were part of the actual project, we also made them fundamental to the method of analysis. We each journalled our thoughts during the research project and reflected throughout on our hopes and intensions for the work. We paid close attention (either at that time or afterwards) to particular moments that produced strong feelings in the body, times when we experienced powerful and distracting emotions and/or affect. Using these to reflect on the research process, we then formed our journal entries into more coherent (and readable) narratives and poems.

The prose narratives are more direct stories about our emotional experiences; they communicate directly with the reader and ask for understanding about a particular research moment. The two poems (further below) add another layer of emotionality to the writing. We use them consciously to evoke emotion rather than tell stories. Poetry adds a tone to research writing that is not possible to evoke with other forms (Richardson, 1998). It also offers a unique way to ‘write the body’ (Rich, 2003) and show how emotional embodiments are inextricably connected to research ontologies and fields of practice. Faulkner (2007: 222) argues that poetry is, indeed, an embodied form of writing that is “about showing, not telling, our (in)humanity and all of its mysteries.” Poetry rather invites the reader to feel, to linger in the text and understand the context in a deeper or more embodied way.

Bourdieu’s ideas about embodiment provide a useful framework for thinking about how lived emotions are formed within particular

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