ETHNOGRAPHIC INTIMACY

Navigating Friendships and Vulnerabilities in the Field

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Abstract

In recent decades, anthropologists have increasingly recognised the researcher's vulnerability as an inherent and indispensable element of ethnographic field research. This article shares my ethnographic fieldwork experiences navigating the intricate relationships of a coliving facility in Ho Chi Minh City. I argue that emotional engagement within fieldwork relationships—embracing the dual role of researcher and friend—can yield unexpected insights. Nevertheless, there are inherent complexities in negotiating a network of relationships that demand a high degree of emotional resilience, especially for anthropologists conducting research "at home". This article calls on researchers to recognise reciprocal vulnerability not as a weakness, but as an asset for arriving at empathetic understandings of complex social worlds.

Keywords: *friendship as method, ethnographic intimacy, reciprocal vulnerability, anthropology at home, emotional episodes*

"If it weren't for you all, if you had not taken care of me, I would not know what to do. I had imagined the worst when I woke up this morning unable to walk." Nam confided in me as I picked up his medical records and pushed him out of the emergency room. This medical emergency would eventually become a joke, a fond memory of an eventful day. His sudden immobility turned out to be the early onset of hereditary gout. Finally settled and calm—albeit a little giggly, possibly from the joint he had smoked to help ease the pain—Nam looked up to ask if I was okay. I was surprised at the question, considering he was in a much more vulnerable state than me. "I meant emotionally, how is your heart doing?" Nam clarified.

In the days before and after Nam's trip to the emergency ward, I experienced something that marked a breakthrough in my relationship with key interlocutors, something that changed my position, presentation, and understanding of the field: I got my heart broken. While the party involved was not a part of the coliving community I studied, we had spent long hours in conversations in the coliving space with my interlocutors, rendering the experience a part of my "fieldwork". During my last few weeks in Ho Chi Minh City, I was fortunate enough to experience the care of the community I researched. By allowing myself to be vulnerable with my research interlocutors, I secured invaluable research *and* the gift of long-lasting friendship and deep emotional bonds.

This article presents the ethical and methodological conundrum I faced during my residency at a coliving facility, where I studied innovations in the Vietnamese real estate industry. I followed Lisa Tillmann-Healy's (2003) concept of "friendship as method", which calls

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for procedures and processes that build friendship in research communities. Here, I explore the emotional vulnerabilities faced as a researcher in the field. Understanding the reciprocal vulnerabilities between researchers and interlocutors is productive for everyday life in any research setting, not only in work on difficult topics like violence and trauma. By practising the ethics of the ordinary and friendship as method, anthropologists who allow themselves to be vulnerable can benefit from empathetic, emotionally connected ethnographic fieldwork and potential lifelong bonds with their communities.

Vulnerability, Friendship, and Ethnographic Intimacy

Anthropology's primary research methodology, ethnographic fieldwork, can be a mystery to outsiders and insiders alike. Researchers invest time in learning a community's language and culture to gain rapport and insider viewpoints—a close relationship with research informants is always desired (Murchison 2010, 6–7). However, the irony of "how to do" ethnography research, as Randall, Harper, and Rouncefield (2007, 169–70) frame it, is that "no one, no matter how practiced, can tell anyone else, no matter how naive, how to do it", except that the methods are "those of understanding, common sense and goodwill". Methodological texts teach students to "[spend] lots of time (...), learn the language, hang out, do all the everyday things that everyone else does, become inconspicuous by sheer tenaciousness, and stay aware of what's really going on" (Bernard 2006, 345), act and adapt as you normally would in an unfamiliar social situation (Spradley 1980). Most researchers enter fieldwork with these propositions and a "just do it and you will know it" mentality, along with important technical skills for interviews, observations, and note-taking.

Anthropology of Emotions and Reciprocal Vulnerability

The reflexive turn of the 1970s–1980s and the affective turn of the 1990s transformed the way anthropologists conduct research. The past two decades have also seen anthropology, especially feminist anthropology, responding to a growing call to acknowledge emotions as an indispensable element by "placing emotion onto an epistemologically relevant plane" (Davies 2010, 3) and including emotional self-reflexivity in anthropological methodological training (Spencer 2010). Ruth Behar's (1996) seminal work challenged traditional detached observation methods and advocated for vulnerability as an asset to research. Contemporary anthropologists now talk about their various experiences with loss, trauma, and discomfort. Emotional discomfort is the most common response to what Katz (2019, 23) calls "the shame of the inevitably naked researcher". Anthropologists have also reported intense feelings of hatred (Hage 2010) or guilt about the stark disparity of their socioeconomic situations with the researched (Lücking 2019; von Vacano 2019). In entering and leaving the field, some researchers experience disappointment and shock (Della Rocca 2019) or a disconnectedness from interlocutors (Hughes and Walter 2021).

As ethnographic training has been accused of being based on the experience of a white, Western, male and able-bodied researcher, many aspects of researchers' vulnerabilities are rarely addressed in preparing them for the field. Accounts of researchers, especially women anthropologists, being subject to sexual harassment, rape, and discrimination are also abundant (Ambujam 2021; Hanson and Richards 2017; Pollard 2009; Sanson and Le Breton 2020). Many who study injustice and oppression feel helplessness when witnessing the violence committed against their research participants, experiencing reciprocal vulnerability to what their interlocutors face (Schild 2021). Researchers sometimes resort to establishing an emotional distance from interlocutors or even retreat from the field in response to personal attacks (Lücking 2019) or intrusive surveillance and fabrications (Hughes and Walter 2021). I personally know researchers who have faced imprisonment, interrogation, and death threats on account of criticism of governments. Many who experienced and endured trauma (Reyes-Foster and Lester 2019) resist seeking help; others intellectualise their traumatic experiences in the guise of academic rigour (Beckett 2019).

However, vulnerability manifests as helplessness, anger, fear, trauma, and loss in dire conditions *and* in everyday life. Acknowledging that the researcher is also vulnerable—sometimes almost comically so—makes them more relatable and allows them to build solidarity (Fuchs 2021). Yet, vulnerability also exists in what Veena Das calls "the everyday life of the human" and the "ordinary other" (Das 2007; cited in Laugier 2016). In caring for the ordinary, we notice the vulnerable in the ordinary and the fact that we are all vulnerable (Laugier 2016).

Friendship as Method

The anthropology of friendship has centred around its autonomous, voluntary, and candid nature, with many arguing that friendship is rooted in both affection and homophilic and reciprocal fundamentals. We tend to befriend those who are similar and with whom we have a mutually beneficial relationship (Bell and Coleman 1999). The paradox of friendship, as Julian Pitt-Rivers (2016 [1983]) notes, is that while a reciprocal obligation beyond emotion is implied, the demand for return cannot be expressed; yet, if the counter-gesture is not made, offence is taken. The tacit agreement of friendship is that all parties should demonstrate an implicit reciprocity in contribution.

The processes of building friendships and conducting ethnographic fieldwork share many similarities. In applying "friendship as method", Tillmann-Healy (2003) advocated for a process of qualitative data-gathering that revolves around friendship-building—albeit employing the usual research methods. This method joins academic and personal discourses with a unique perspective on social life. The intensity of the relationships created through this research means that doing fieldwork through the practice of friendship "carries all the risks that friendship does" and "[because] we must reveal and invest so much of ourselves, researchers are exposed and vulnerable, which means we can be profoundly disappointed, frustrated, or hurt" (Tillman-Healy 2003, 741). As "[the] bottom-line about ethnography is that it is about forming relationships [and] the search for connection within and across borders" (Behar 1999, 477), friendship as method "ultimately allow[s] us to appreciate and understand the lived and intersubjective nature of our ethnographic fieldwork" (Mackinlay and Bartleet 2012, 85).

Helen Owton and Jacquelyn Allen-Collison (2014, 285) characterised friendship as method, not methodology, due to its philosophical goal of "actively challenging, disrupting, and sometimes undermining what can be a considerable power imbalance between researcher and participant". A project employing friendship imposes obligations and demands on the ethnographer as we "engage others' humanity, struggles, and oppression, (…) anyone who takes on this sort of project must be emotionally strong and willing to face pressure, resistance, backlash, and perhaps even violence" (Tillman-Healy 2003, 743). Ethnographic intimacy becomes a productive element of fieldwork, not just in qualitative data collection, but also in the ethical exercise of friendship. The ethics of friendship is not a guise to gain more access to data (Ellis 2007); rather, we approach our fieldwork relationships with "a stance of hope, caring, justice, and even love" (Tillman-Healy 2003, 735). The following section discusses emotions and vulnerability in my fieldwork using friendship as method, including the emotional labour afforded by and between the researcher and interlocutors.

Being *At Home* in the Field

My research project examined "innovation" as a panacea for social issues in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as promoted by international development discourses and the Vietnamese government. I focussed my study on the sharing economy, specifically space-sharing startups known as Space-as-a-Service (SpaaS) businesses. Therefore, I sought out membership in coworking and coliving spaces in two large cities, Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).[1] Coworking and coliving spaces provide technology-enabled flexible solutions to disrupt traditional real estate markets and working-living arrangements around the world. They promise community and a future that ushers in "the end of urban loneliness" (Coldwell 2019; Spinuzzi 2012). These co-spaces have proliferated in Viet Nam since governmental efforts have focussed on entrepreneurship and innovation, nurturing startup communities, young professionals, and the general public. The majority of coliving inhabitants are young (in their 20s and 30s), tech-savvy, white-collar professionals and intellectuals working in entrepreneurial, flexible, and digitally immersed sectors, a significant element of the growing Vietnamese middle class (Nguyen 2023). As a Vietnamese national doing "anthropology at home" (Peirano 1998), these demographic categorisations helped me easily position myself as a member of the "communities" I set out to study.

I found one such community in my first coliving space, Modern Hamlet, the first of its kind in Viet Nam.[2] Modern Hamlet coliving space is situated in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)—still colloquially known as *Sài Gòn*—the biggest city and economic hub of Viet Nam. Nested in three old French colonial-era villas, it was renovated shortly before the

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[1] The spelling of "coworking" and "coliving" – as hyphenated or not – has been an ongoing debate for the past few decades in the industry. While most of the time the two spellings ("coworking/coliving" versus "co-working/co-living") have been used interchangeably, I chose to use the spelling with neither a hyphen nor a space to 1. follow the style that many of my interlocutors choose when they write these words in English and 2. argue that the subtle intentional misspelling denotes its distancing from other, older forms of co-working and -living, that they represent an innovation. A short industry explanation can be found in Meunier (2018).

[2] Pseudonym of the coliving space.

pandemic to embrace the vision of an urban village. Modern Hamlet was unlike any other residential area I visited. Its biophilic design, open architecture, and ambient tranquillity contrasted with the bustling traffic on the main street barely a hundred metres away. Behind a card-secured gate, the coliving space boasted a serene and welcoming feeling, surrounded by the canopies of decades-old trees. A sign at the gate relaying the company's values and mission immediately caught my attention:

> *Modern Hamlet is a modern community living concept built on an idea: bringing like-minded people into a contemporary living lifestyle, individual homes amidst collective spaces that can yield maximum freedom, connection and creativity (...) We believe there is nothing matters above the sense of belonging, where peace of mind and aspirations are cultivated to nurture one's path, together with the community they are happy to live with, excited to participate in and passionate to contribute to enrich lives of others.*

These words on a humble wooden plank gave me new-found inspiration and set the tone for the following weeks. Before arriving at Modern Hamlet, I had been frustrated with the fairly shallow insights gathered from other co-spaces. The narrative of "building community" was rehearsed by operators, staff, and members alike. Up to this point, I had principally established professional relationships with these interlocutors via interviews, conversation, and participant observation, as both a researcher and a "coworker" sharing their workspace. I had envisioned a doctoral project that would combine economic anthropology and organisational ethnography of these start-up businesses. I remember expressing disappointment with my supervisors that my research had been more economic than anthropological; I was advised to explore other avenues and kinds of relationships.

Choosing to study Modern Hamlet was a leap of faith. What started as a one-week stay turned into two extended trips, lasting one and two months respectively, followed by shorter stints of personal visits squeezed in whenever I was back in the country. Myriad factors help explain why my ethnographic experiences at Modern Hamlet were starkly different from previous co-spaces. It might be the intensity of living in close quarters and the sheer spontaneity of encounters that allowed me to spend more time in a relaxed environment facilitated by the design of communal areas in the coliving. The staff also went the extra mile to ensure the quality of the service because, for them, I was a resident before I was a researcher. Furthermore, Modern Hamlet's founders frequently visited the space. However, in retrospect, it was the friendships I made with the unique constellations of people there, most significantly with some of the longest-staying residents, that offered important insights and answered many questions.

Life and Friendship in Coliving

James Carrier defined friendship as a kind of relationship that is "based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment and affection", one that is free from the limits of geography, proximity, or pre-existing relationships such as kinship or trade (Carrier 1999, 21–2). My rela-

tionship with some residents, who later became key interlocutors, started with such spontaneity. My first chance encounter occurred on my second evening as I passed the communal garden where the residents were gathered around a big starfruit tree, the "village meeting place". When invited for a drink, I immediately accepted the glass of wine despite being a non-drinker. With hindsight, I am reminded of Meenakshi Nair Ambujam's reflection on the ethnographer's vulnerability and position when taking decisions or actions that you would not make in your normal personal life. Outside of the field situation, you would not just "talk to strangers, exchange numbers, or accept an invitation to walk with [them]", the kind of encounters which are "brimming with possibilities and potential" that help "build enduring bonds and relationships" in ethnographic research contexts (Ambujam 2021, 192).

However, it was not pure affection that established my relationship, but the homophily of friendship. As a resident of the coliving, coming from a largely similar demographic and socioeconomic background, I related to many of the residents' experiences. My initial interactions were more of a "contractual relationship, implicit or explicit, in which each party helps the other" (Titon 2008, 77). I shared knowledge about my research topic on coworking, coliving, and startup entrepreneurship, and they agreed to be interviewed as makers and users of these spaces.

While conducting the "coliving fieldwork", I was also doing "coworking fieldwork", which sometimes meant spending a large chunk of the day at coworking offices around the city. Back in the coliving, I conducted interviews with residents and staff members, its founders and investors to understand the facility's operations, daily life, and aspirations. I acted as the careful listener to every seemingly mundane story my informants were willing to share. I sat at different spots around the complex to observe their activities. I followed staff as they made up the rooms or organised the utility. Occasionally, I was invited to eat and join parties with the residents in the garden; yet most evenings, I took off my "researcher hat" to spend time with friends outside the complex, only to feel guilty about missing out on the happenings within.

For the first few weeks, no matter how much one-on-one or small group time I spent with the residents, I was not added to the group chat on messaging apps, nor did I receive more than a last-minute invitation to gatherings. I was an observer–participant orbiting around the edges of their universe. They only asked me for professional opinions about the lifestyle, the business model, and saw me as a "coliving expert" among them. Frustrated, I decided to invest more time, and subsequently, more of myself, into the coliving community. I began to work full days alongside the residents, many of whom had flexible jobs that allowed for remote working. I also invited my friends into the coliving instead of meeting them outside. By *being there* with full attention, I started developing a more personal relationship with the residents, which sometimes blurred the line between my roles; as Ambujam (2021, 191) knew, "[fieldwork] presents a liminal space where the personal and professional collapse."

The natural development of my relationship with residents helped us open up to one another. As a result, I gained much deeper insights into the coliving life through both my own experience and people's accounts. I let these relationships unfold naturally since "friendship as method demands that we research at the natural pace of friendship" (Tillman-Healy 2003, 734) and I wanted to understand how sociality was negotiated in the coliving space.

The following sections relay three events, or "key emotional episodes", that marked turning points in my progress. I let emotional connection and friendship with some of my key interlocutors play a significant role in my fieldwork; in addition to *being there* and *being with* them, I allowed myself to *feel for* and *feel with* them.

Key Emotional Episodes—Turning the Page

I depart from Peter Berger's concept of "Key Emotional Episodes" (KEE), which was defined as emotionally charged situations that "have a more radical impact on the persons involved". Such episodes "can exert essential influence on the field situation" – where "the side of 'observation' was at zero and the aspect of 'participation' at a maximum" (Berger 2010, 119–20). For Berger, these moments were surprising, unplanned, and out of control: the researcher was forced to succumb to the events and let their emotions and body (rather than conscious and rational decisions) take over. My experience was far less intense than Berger's KEEs;[3] however, I resonate with his apt descriptions. I only fully grasped the significance of these episodes after leaving the field, a general field experience whereby insights stand out only after researchers have left and the writing process starts, not in the moment caught up in daily life (Ingold 2014). The following sections describe how friendship as method and vulnerability retrospectively helped me make sense of these turning points. The first KEE happened around the end of my first extended stay in Modern Hamlet; the second occurred in between site visits; and the third happened in my last few weeks of coliving fieldwork.

KEE 1—"Going Native"[4]

During the last week of my first extended stay, we celebrated the Independence Day holiday over a long weekend. Some of the residents made plans to spend the weekend together in the coliving instead of returning to their family homes. I decided to invite everyone to my apartment for lunch. This was the first time I volunteered to host a gathering in my room; it symbolically opened the door for my interlocutors to learn more about my world.[5] The lunch turned into a board game night, then a few more nights of drinking, games, and long conversations. After two months, I had gradually turned from "a doctoral researcher that studies coliving space" into "a neighbour that lives in our 'village'." I was finally added to the group

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[3] For example, see Berger's analysis of Renato Rosaldo's KEE in the aftermaths of his wife's death, with other important examples in anthropological literature.

[4] I use "going native" jokingly: for me, it did not entail learning the language or broader cultural practices because I was lucky enough to already come from the same socioeconomic demographics as the majority of people I researched.

[5] Some clarifications might be necessary here: while the name of the living arrangement model is "coliving", people live in self-containing studio / one-bedroom apartments, which are usually small and minimalist but with all necessities (except laundry). The coliving model focusses on building communally used spaces that are luxuries for urban dwellers, such as a garden, library, and meetup space.

chats and invited to gatherings much more frequently, acts that felt like official inclusion into the residents' community.[6] As mobile messaging apps can create or reinforce a sense of belonging and generate digital intimacy (Laan 2023), my membership in the Modern Hamlet residents' group chat allowed me to *be with* them collectively, virtually, while also *being there* in the physical spaces of the coliving facility.

After the holiday, I returned to Hà Nội to meet with my research team and our partner university. On the day of my departure, the residents and staff came to my apartment to say goodbye, helped carry my luggage, and spent time with me. The resident manager gave me a special departing gift, thanking me for the company, conversations, and insights. Nam (who we later took to the hospital) waited for me under the starfruit tree. A quick ren-dez-vous for a goodbye hug turned into an hour-long conversation. Nam told me about his experience moving into Modern Hamlet after ending an eight-year-long relationship. He also described leaving his parents' home as their queer, fourth-generation, first-born son, a title that would burden him with serious familial responsibilities. The serendipity of these last few hours left me in such an emotional state that tears started to roll down my cheeks as I sent my goodbye message in the group chat. I had just said goodbye to friends who had become an integral part of my life, not just people I conduct research on.

KEE 2—Choosing Friendship

Shortly before I moved back into Modern Hamlet for my second extended stay, a couple—both residents—went through a breakup. The event and subsequent revelations of wrong-doings (one party was accused of cheating with another person in the complex) created dif-ferent factions. The open space design of the coliving meant awkward face-to-face interactions were imminent. The couple "co-parented" a cat and co-owned a business, which compli-cated the situation. When I had hung out with them, the cat was especially affectionate towards me, and Linh, his "mom", gave me the title of a godmother. Little Bao's particular fondness for me helped Linh and I grow closer. Therefore, when the breakup happened, I was naturally there to take care of her—not out of an obligation to a participant, but purely out of love for a friend who was hurt. I offered food, medicine, and a shoulder and pair of atten-tive ears. Our friendship and emotional connection consolidated through these difficult times, sometimes at an "accelerated speed of trust", as another resident noted.

Thanh, the ceremonial group leader, shared an insight that resonated with anthropolog-ical literature on friendship:

> *I think about residents in this community as "takers" and "givers". To be a part of this com-munity of coliving residents, you cannot just take—and not just in the sense of money, but also time, effort and emotion—but you need to invest back a part of yourself. Those who would*

[6] Thanh, the resident who was the "admin" of the group chat, mentioned that every decision to add someone into a shared chat is political and carefully curated as it impacts the group dynamics if the residents do not get along well.

only like to take advantage of the community will be seen through and eventually excluded or will leave on their own.

The dissolution of Linh's romantic relationship bifurcated the core group of Modern Hamlet residents and, because of my proximity to Linh, I assigned myself to one of them. Even as I kept professional, diplomatic ties with the other side, I let my empathetic emotions for my friend take over my supposed objectivity. When friendship becomes a method of enquiry, and the network of relationships an object, researchers are exposed and vulnerable to intense emotions. They reveal and invest so much of themselves in the process, the research, and in the friendships they build (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 741). This created a writing challenge—my dual role as friend and researcher shapes "what to divulge, especially regarding information that potentially discredits our participants" (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 741).

The space sharing of coliving has the imminent possibility of conflict; I had to carefully consider the stories that I told between different "sides". The closer I was to someone, the trickier it was to decide: do I provide my friends with beneficial information, or do I stay and let conflicts run their course? When non-intervention prevailed, I felt like I betrayed my friends; yet, when I disclosed certain details as a friend, I wondered whether I was failing as a researcher by altering the trajectory.

KEE 3—The Vulnerable Researcher

The final KEE occurred in the last few weeks of my official fieldwork stay at Modern Hamlet. After Linh's breakup, the bond between the long-term residents' group I associated with strengthened, partly in support of her and partly due to organisational changes that allowed everyone to spend more time in the coliving. Every morning during this period, roundup calls would appear on the group chat, and I would take my laptop and sit at the meeting place. Every mealtime a request was put out to bring your own bowl to enjoy a homecooked meal or join a shared food order. After hours, I would have long conversations with my interlocutors over drinks, games, or music, co-constructing and "enriching the lives of others", as the coliving envisioned.

These daily acts of care were central to the residents' experience of Modern Hamlet, and my interlocutors invited me to participate. When I removed my "researcher hat" and became a friend, I found myself in invaluable conversations with the residents and staff. To reciprocate their kindness, I invited other residents into my life and took care of them as friends and neighbours due to the emotional bond we created as humans coinhabiting a shared space, not out of a researcher's duties. As Sandra Laugier has argued, we are ordinary human beings first and researchers/interlocutors second (Laugier 2016). It is this dependence and vulnerability as ordinary humans that we exercise our ethics of care to protect our interlocutors and nurture our friendships.

One afternoon, I came running home covered in tears with a broken heart, with a plan to bury myself in my room. However, I happened to cross paths with Nam and Linh, and they insisted on offering me shoulders, feeding me, and entertaining me so that I did not have to be alone. The rest of the group took turns visiting me and sleeping over to distract me until

I left. The service that the community offered each other, and by extension, offered me, helped me get through some of the lowest days in my fieldwork. In one of our later reunions, Nam shared that we might not have gotten so close if it had not been for my heartbreak, which placed me in a most vulnerable state. I trusted them to take care of me as I had taken care of them. "These shoulders are to *gánh* you all", Nam always joked, taking on the role of the emotional leader to carry the weight of emotional labour for the group (despite being physically carried by us to the hospital at one point!). As we voluntarily took turns to perform emotional labour, we formed a bond that was at least as strong as, if not more than, with my other longer-term friends. Embracing my experience of being a part of the community helped me understand why many had chosen to stay or return time and time again despite many reasons and opportunities to choose a different living arrangement.

Friendship as an ethnographic method required an immense amount of emotional labour. The residents and I were going through our twenties and thirties, some of the most monumental and defining years of our youth, together. Some moved to the city to pursue their career and escape the social and familial pressure on women to get married and have children early before being deemed "leftover". Others decided to build a new life after breakups and divorces. Some migrated to the city with a dream of changing the rural communities they came from. A few ran away from abusive and toxic relationships with their families who rejected their sexual identities. Everyone treated the connections they found in the coliving as part of a new chosen family on their healing journey. I offered emotional service as other residents sought my company through every major event: breakups, career struggles, or the death of family members. The situations that my interlocutors faced represented the negotiated process of Vietnamese middle-class worry, aspirations, and moralities in an age of anxiety and neoliberal policies (Tran 2023).

Reciprocal Vulnerability with Friendship as Method—Privilege and Power

The ethics of friendship (as method) mean that friendships require at least as much investment as the research project.[7] Opening up or expressing vulnerability is the only fair response to the stories our interlocutors tell us. However, I argue, it is the empathetic nature of friendship as method that allows researchers to embrace the key emotional episodes of *zero observation* and *maximum participation* (that is, *zero researcher* and *maximum friend*), productively reflecting on them to analyse the relationships built with and among our participants. My dual role of researcher and friend was helpful in building a connection with the residents of Modern Hamlet. "Going native" took it further. I embodied the immersed experience of the "community" and allowed myself to put aside my researcher role. I embraced being a human and fully stripped any defence or worry about acting professionally. I allowed myself to be taken care of, both in terms of everyday necessities and emotions.

However, this comes with caveats. As Carolyn Ellis (2004, 118) warns, being too emotionally involved with events and processes during fieldwork means that researchers will face mental and intellectual obstacles in the analysis process. I gained insights that I only realised

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[7] For example, see Tillmann-Healy's discussion of Leigh Berger's research on Messianic Judaism (2003, 741).

later when I was distanced from the field and had time to reflect. While remaining critical of the underlying structures and issues around the coliving industry (which are beyond the scope of this article), I am more comfortable in mobilising support for the aspirations and vision of the coliving lifestyle. My emotional connection and display of vulnerability also set the foundation for my friendship with interlocutors as I empathised with them through their experiences of trauma, loss, and heartbreaks.

I also had the privilege of leaving the field in my role as a researcher. Friendship as method meant my friendships with the residents continued beyond the end of my physical stay, especially through digital technology-enabled "co-presence" (Chua 2021). However, I also recognise the power of being physically removed from the day-to-day at the coliving, and how writing about it advances my academic career. The boundaries of the field become blurred as I choose a different way of *being there* and *being with* my informants through daily chats, video calls and frequent check-ins. I reconstructed my engagement with my "field" from "co-location" to "co-presence" (Beaulieu 2010).

Shortly after I returned to Switzerland, the core group of residents and I started a project to develop a collection of multimodal outputs—books, podcasts, videos, and other multimedia—to promote the coliving model emerging in Viet Nam. While the project is currently on hold due to other life commitments, I see it as an opportunity to both "give back" and co-construct knowledge beyond academia. In response to the collaboration and solidarity that emerged from friendship as method, I have remained in constant dialogue with residents, shared publication drafts (including this article) and research summaries, and engaged with their suggestions to ensure I present a just account of events in my research outputs.

Conclusion

This article discussed my experience conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a coliving space, using the concepts of "friendship as method" and reciprocal vulnerability. It has been almost three decades since Ruth Behar (1996, 16) reaffirmed that "when you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably". Generations of anthropologists have since pushed for a form of ethnography that embraces the vulnerabilities researchers face in the field. Researching with vulnerability and friendship productively allowed me to open up, be emotionally vulnerable, feel with and feel for my interlocutors. Everyday care work and emotional labour was afforded reciprocally with my interlocutors beyond my role as a researcher. I could not have achieved this level of ethnographic intimacy if I had insisted on being a more objective observer. I demonstrated how "key emotional episodes" shaped anthropological research around emotional experiences and can act as a catalyst not only in advancing fieldwork friendships but also in illuminating hidden insights.

The emotions that render us vulnerable when we conduct fieldwork are not singular to anthropology. However, anthropology as a discipline, somewhat uniquely, allows researchers the opportunity to explore them. After all, anthropology is "the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities" (Kroeber n. d., cited in Sluka and Robben 2012, 6). The lens of reciprocal vulnerabilities helps researchers relate to the communities they do research with on topics where the risks of physical and mental injuries are imminent

and foreseeable. However, it is also valuable in everyday and ordinary research projects that deal with relatively "benign" and "normal" topics. Acknowledging that the researcher is vulnerable—and, at the end of the day, a human—can open up avenues and trajectories for research to see beyond the surface. By fully embracing these experiences, especially the emotional aspects of field situations, researchers will be more empathetic to their research partners and translate those experiences into advocacy and solidarity with the researched communities.

I echo calls to include affective dimensions of fieldwork and aspects of friendship in methodological training, particularly for novice fieldworkers, even in projects where strong emotions are not expected (Stodulka, Dinkelaker, and Thajib 2019; Tillman-Healy 2003). This may bear the risk of rendering the researchers professionally vulnerable in an increasingly volatile and precarious academic environment. Nonetheless, doing carefully conducted anthropology from the heart brings a much more rewarding experience to the researcher, and rich, nuanced and meaningful insights to others. As Laura Thurmann (2020) reminds us, anthropology would be "a sad discipline if compassion, empathy and shared feelings of joy, trust and anger were not at the very heart of our methodology".

Acknowledgement

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