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Emotional Encounters During Fieldwork: Researching Brazilian Women Migrants as a Brazilian Women Researcher

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ethical implications of doing qualitative research among migrant women while being a migrant woman researcher myself. Brennan (2014)'s affective turn shows us how affect (both positive and negative) irradiates powerfully between one subject and another; while Ahmed (2010) reminds us that our affective situation may shape what/how we will feel. Based on experiences and reflections, since my PhD in 2008, on Brazilian migrants' experiences in Portugal, I borrow Teresa Brennan's concepts of affect and Sara Ahmed's notion of emotion to look at how our encounters throughout our fieldwork with migrant women affect our bodies and vice versa. Moving away from the insider/outsider dichotomy, I argue that our knowledge production practice with migrant women is a reciprocal emotional reaction, surrounded by inequality power dynamics, which entails a set of ethical implications when translating these emotional reactions as research outputs.

Keywords: *Emotions; affection; migration; encounters; reflexivity*

Introduction

In the last decades, methodological diversification has taken a special place in migration studies this growth. Researchers in the migration field have paid particular attention to how we approach the field. The reflexive engagement has furnished researchers with the necessary tools to move beyond the rigid notions of insider and outsider, and the idea of the researcher being unaffected by their fieldwork emotional encounters (Wray & Bartholomew, 2010).

In this paper, acknowledging my positionality as migrant woman and feminist researcher, I will engage with Teresa Brennan (2014)'s concepts of affect and Sara Ahmed (2010)'s notion of emotion to look at how our encounters throughout our fieldwork with migrant women affect our bodies and vice versa. Brennan (2014)'s affective turn shows us how affect (both positive and negative) irradiates powerfully between one subject and another; while Ahmed (2010) reminds us that our affective situation may shape what/how we will feel. Moving away from the insider/outsider dichotomy, and following a reflexive exercise to revisit the voices of the migrant women I encountered during my fieldwork, I argue that our knowledge production practice with migrant women is a reciprocal emotional reaction, surrounded by inequality power dynamics, which entails a set of ethical implications when translating these emotional reactions as research outputs.

The background for this analysis is my over 10 years of fieldwork experience as a Brazilian woman and feminist researcher working with Brazilian migrants in Portugal. Coloniality has played a central role in shaping Brazilian migrants' experience in Portugal, reinforcing

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inequalities, legitimising power asymmetries, and fostering exotisation, stereotyping, and stigmatisation (Gomes, 201). In this setting, I will reflect on how power and knowledge production interact in my scholarly practice.

On affections, emotions, and fieldwork

Teresa Brennan (2010)'s unexplored contribution to affect theory and Sara Ahmed (2014)'s work on emotions offer innovative insights to look at the intersubjective boundaries in fieldwork, allowing us to go beyond the understanding of researchers' positionality as fixed and reflecting on how the movement of emotions affects researchers in the field.

In her posthumous work, *The Transmission of Affect*, Brennan conceptualises affect as the energy circulation between and among individuals (Brennan, 2014). Brennan's notion of intersubjective energy, namely "the circulation of energy and transmission of affect" between individuals, furnishes us with "tools to develop an ethics and politics of difference with a radical responsibility for others" (Oliver, 2012, p. 21).

The simple, but memorable, question asked at the beginning of her book "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and "felt the atmosphere"?" (Brennan, 2014, p. 1) is the start of a long ride to deconstruct the presumption that affections are personal and who remains unaffected by the others' affection. According to Walker (2019, p. 160), "Brennan's work brings the question of intersubjective boundaries to the fore, arguing that these are open and that any account of ethical relations between self and other needs to acknowledge this". For Brennan, affect, both negative and positive - e.g. instance, anger and grief or humor and happiness, respectively – originates in the social relational entanglements with others, thus the circulation of energy between individuals can both enhance and deplete individuals. Hence, by looking at the affective encounters between bodies and how one "feels another's feelings", she provides an alternative way to re-examine the relationship between the self and the other (Brennan, 2014, p. 27).

Sara Ahmed (2010) critically engages with Brennan's work. She praises Brennan's views to affect as contagious, as it opposes the idea that affect inhabits an individual body, showing "how we are affected by what is around us" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29). Ahmed underscores, however, that one is not equally affected in the same way by another.

According to her, "we may walk into the room and 'feel the atmosphere', but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 41). As a dialogical process, emotional encounters will also propel the other's perceptions about us. Therefore, power relations will change the room's atmosphere.

I would allude also to Ahmed's idea of emotions being located "in between", challenging notions of the "inside-out" or "outside-in" approach. For her, emotions are primarily social, cultural, and political relations, hence belonging to neither the individual nor the collective only. Ahmed challenges the ordinary understanding of emotion as a private psychological disposition that can be exteriorised as the individual act on them (inside-out movement) or the perception shared mainly by sociologist and anthropologists of emotions as a cultural practice that are internalised by the individual. She argues that emotions circulate fostering connections, as it mediates the relationship between inside and outside (Ahmed, 2004, p. 29).



This view of the sociality of emotion suggests that emotions play a role in aligning individuals with others and with collectives. In this sense, emotion is about connections and attachments to others. Ahmed's (2004, p. 27) vocabulary embraces "emotion" rather than affection, aiming at stressing the idea of movement, "what moves us". For her:

emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others (...) emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.

Ahmed's perspective is instructive for my purpose because it furnishes me with reflexive lenses to think about my emotional encounters in the field. Building on Ahmed's notions that contact with other in the field shapes what we do, Laliberté and Schurr (2016) equate our actions in the field to emotional reactions. They argue that we should be aware of how emotions circulate between bodies in the field, to understand our how emotional entanglements and "positionalities as researchers enmeshed in larger power structures" (Laliberté & Schurr, 2016, p. 74). Hence, the way we experience the atmosphere is not evenly. As Ahmed (2010) states, what we receive when we enter a room depends on how we "enter a room", how we are perceived when we "enter a room", and our affective situation.

These emotional encounters are also performative, in the sense that they repeat past histories/associations as well as generates new meanings (Ahmed, 2014, p. 93). Moreover, emotional encounters are directly implicated in the surface of borders and paradoxically, accounting also for their unmaking. Therefore, the emotional encounters in our field blur the supposedly clear and fixity boundaries of the insider-outsider dichotomy.

Like Brennan and Ahmed, I see emotions in the field work neither as an individual experience not only as located in the social, but rather as the combination of the personal with the social. Against this background, reflexivity was a crucial tool to guide my understanding of my fieldwork, as it raised my awareness about the situated knowledge I was producing. As Haraway (1988) argues, reflexivity is a key ethical pillar in the process of knowledge production. By adopting a reflexive standing point, I was constantly scrutinising how elements from my biography, my feminist position, my decolonial engagement, and my privileges would encroach on the emotional encounters I was developing in the field.

On the field

Having traced the theoretical background that supports my critical reflexivity, I now shift to my fieldwork experiences as a Brazilian migrant feminist woman in Portugal researching Brazilian migrant women in Portugal. Not exciting news so far, as the number of international students rises and migrants' descendants graduate and join research career, more studies have been developed on their migrant group (Carling et al., 2013). However, considering how the affects transmission and emotional entanglements take place in the field offers the possibility to move beyond the insider–outsider divide in migration research.

Encountering my field

I entered the doctorate programme in 2008 with a dissertation project in mind, but with a great lack of knowledge about my field – Brazilian migrant women in the Portuguese labour market. Have lived in Italy for two years during my master (from 2006 to 2008), after finishing my bachelor in my home country, I moved to Portugal with high school knowledge about Brazil's former coloniser. However, I had solid experience as a Brazilian migrant woman in Italy.

Like many of those researching their “own community”, I believed that the shared cultural, linguistic, and national connection with Brazilian migrant women would be an advantage and would facilitate my access to participants. I believed they would feel more prone and open to share their experiences with me, as I, like them, had also endured discrimination based on my *gendered* nationality. Somehow, this feeling was not entirely misplaced, as many of the interviews I carried were in participants' homes, sharing intimate moments such as having lunch or dinner, going to pick up their kids at school, and introducing their families and friends to me. Others would quickly organise informal gatherings for me to meet other Brazilian women and present my study. This was the case of Angelica, who was 40 years old at the time and worked in a supermarket in Lisbon. She had been living in Portugal for 8 years and had many friends. After we finished the interview and I explained to her that I was looking for other participants she immediately said:

Wait just a second, I will call some of my friends and we can arrange to meet tomorrow for coffee and cake at my place. I am sure they will be very excited to talk to you, they are full of stories. You know, it is not every day that we have someone important to talk to (breaking in laughs).

Angelica made me I aware that my position as a doctoral student, my favored economic background, my smooth migration trajectory backed up by a higher education institution, and my then 25 years old could directly affect the hierarchical dimension of the relation I could build in my fieldwork, as all the women I interviewed were performing unskilled jobs, despite some of them having tertiary degrees. These women did not see me as one of them. For them, academia would entitle me to a prestigious social position that they would not enjoy.

Although none of them entered the country irregularly, as Brazilians do not need a visa to enter in Portugal as a tourist, all of them overstayed the legal period and were irregular for a certain period. This would imprint different experiences on their migrant bodies that I have not come across. “When you are illegal you do whatever appears to make ends meet: nanny, cleaning, watering. You have no choice, baby”. That's how Lily Braun described her experience in Portugal: a lack of choices. She was 30 years old when I interviewed her, and although Lily had a higher education degree, as she entered the country as a tourist, she did not have a working visa. She did not have a choice, but I had plenty.

Inevitably, these asymmetries shaped my emotional experience in the field, for instance, how I felt about them and how they felt about me. Reflexivity was then crucial to enlighten my analysis bearing in mind the power asymmetries present in the field (England, 1994).

The more I entered the field, the more challenges I would face. In my search for different experiences of Brazilian women in the Portuguese labour market, I ended up coming across



a religiously conservative group of neo-pentecostal evangelicals. I was not prepared for this encounter. It was both emotionally draining as well as harsh.

The discrimination that we face in Portugal is because there are “some” Brazilian women who come here looking for men, no matter if they are married or not (Iracema, 46 years old).

In general, I like to live in Portugal, but I don’t like the idea that in her school, my 12 years old daughter has teachers who tell her that abortion is a women’s right. Only God can take a life away (Beatriz, 46 years old).

Confronting myself with their conservative discourse about gender issues – abortion, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc., – and family, the lack of criticism concerning their churches rules on which clothes to wear, with whom to socialise, and their arrogance in regards to the superiority of their religion were violence against my feminist and democratic values.

My readings on and exchange with other peers Brazilian migrants to Portugal and Brazilian women’s migration experiences had not prepared me for this endeavor. I would say this was the uneasiest ethical exercise I endured so far. While I felt the need to establish boundaries between these women and myself to safeguard my position as a researcher and to allow me to analyse the role of their political and religious views in their migration trajectory and experience.

Reflexivity was crucial in this process, as I had to continually look at how my biography was shaping my interaction with the group as well as my analysis. Although, I never intended to adopt and “neutral and objective” position in regard to their social beliefs, I was aware I needed to have clear how my values were casting how I was conducting my fieldwork at that stage.

On the contrary, to investigations on the far-right and conservative movements which aim analyses the social dynamics that support conservative ideologies (Blee, 2007), my focus was these women’s migration experience. In this very specific case, I should not examine the content of their political and religious beliefs, but rather how these practices shaped their migration trajectory.

I concluded my PhD in due time, in 2012, and continued my academic career path in the Portuguese academia. As a post-doctoral researcher, I coordinated a project focused on international academic mobility to Portugal from 2013 to 2018. I kept my interest in Brazilian women migrants in the country, now looking at how they would experience their academic careers. My fieldwork took place during the last austerity years that ravaged Portugal, from 2013 to 2014.

During those years, public cuts in science and research funds were brutal. The national atmosphere was gloomy. Most of the Brazilian women scholars and scientists I interviewed were in precarious positions, their contracts would end soon, and they had no guarantee of what would happen next. Invariably, the accounts of the Brazilian women scholars I interviewed were too pessimistic, reporting high levels of discrimination they would face in Portuguese academia.

Overall, interviewees were unenthusiastic and emotionally depleted.

I only accepted to give you this interview because more than ever we need to talk about precarity in academia. Fundamentally, we discuss this with our colleagues, academia doesn't like to think about academia. But to think about my future career is depressing. As you still have some years ahead with your contract, you might be able to develop consistent work.

(Lidia, 40 years old, post-doctoral researcher in chemistry in her last contract year)

The interviews I conducted with Brazilian women scholars in Portugal felt like a conversation. For them, our encounter was an opportunity to externalise their voices. They saw me as their peer and acknowledged the relevance of my work to their careers, diluting any existing seniority and/or field hierarchical relations between us. Although my position as a feminist researcher did not grant me any special privileged among them (as it did among my interviewees during my PhD), it was seen as a political tool to be used strategically to make a political claim.

I had just officially started my independent research career path, and my post-doctoral position was for generous six years and therefore I was financially 'protected', I was wracked with fear, ambiguities, and frustration in regards to my academic career future. I struggled to create a "safe space" for myself as a researcher and the heavy "mood" of the Portuguese contemporary academia (Pereira, 2017) contaminated my passion for my project.

Although at that time, I was academically more mature than during my PhD, the fact that I identified myself with the Brazilian women I was interviewing and shared some of their concerns, made it more complicated to establish boundaries and generated a concrete field space. Even if my situation was different, this emotional encounter produced the effect of "collective" in which we shared the same *sadness* (Ahmed, 2004). As a result, after a few preliminary analyses of the collected data and some occasional publications, I was not able to delve properly into the richness of the 30 interviews I conducted. I failed in corresponding to my interviewees' expectations to make a political standing about the structural precarity in Portuguese academia.

As the years went by, I endured in academia. Since 2018, I have been working with Brazilian international students. I am not a young PhD student who could easily relate to these students anymore and I have been away from Brazil for over 17 years. I still share, however, a past as an international student, which is a door opener for interview students. Despite of the timespan between my experience as an international student and theirs, the interviews I have been carrying with them are "pleasantly" familiar. Likewise, students' familiarity with the academic environment and their perception of commonalities between us could be one of the reasons why they are so keen and enthusiastic about participating in the research. "You have been there, you did your PhD here, I am sure you know what I am talking about, professors always complaint if I use only Brazilian authors to support an argument", said Lucy, a 24 years old PhD student, I interviewed in 2019, referring to how epistemic hierarchies in Portuguese academia.

Furthermore, as discussions about racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and coloniality within the Brazilian student community in Portugal grows (Iorio & Nogueira, 2019; Santos, 2020), I also feel more and more motivated to encounter the new generation of Brazilian students enrolled in the Portuguese higher education system. Lucy is 20 years old and is finishing her bachelor's in psychology. She told me very proud about her participation in a political



mobilisation organised by students *“I was part of the campaign against racism at the University of Coimbra, it was already time for us to do something”*. Despite the negative emotions embedded in the daily experience of Brazilian students in Portugal, our encounters were inspiring for me. Although we shared similar sad feelings in regard to how the others in Portugal feel us, it also aligned us together, making “the collective” appear (Ahmed, 2004).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the last decade, I have been working in migration research, navigating the insider-outsider positionality, not as a divide but as a constant negotiation of different, contradictory, and complementary positionalities. The emotional endeavours in the field not only shape my research practices, but also has methodological implication as well as poses embodied ethical challenges.

While listening to my participants, during my PhD fieldwork, it was inevitable not to relate their experience of negative emotional encounters to my own. The histories that came before us engraved social markers in ourselves, directing our encounters as racialised bodies and non-white migrants in the former colonial metropole.

In this sense, the field was Brennan’s “atmosphere” and I was being affected by my participants’ affection. However, my privileges and protected position when compared to theirs would allow me to feel their affection from a specific angle, as Ahmed (2010) foregrounds. Hence, neither was I an insider nor an outsider. My positionality was an outcome of embodied encounters. Unfortunately, not all emotional encounters in the field are empathic. Some are troublesome, as they put us in touch with ideologies against our core beliefs.

Hence, in some situations, the circulation of emotions in the field and my contact with certain bodies, namely the conservative religious group, forced me to create boundaries aiming at protecting our encounters and producing more ethically committed research (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016). Emotional boundary-making enabled me to safeguard the space where the analytic reflections take place. Negotiating this distance was also an embodied experience shaped by the transmission of affect.

The negative affects I experienced during my encounters with the neo-pentecostal evangelic women – e.g. anger and repulse – urged me to reassess my presence in the field, aiming at preventing me to be blinded by my biography. Likewise, the excitement produced by the pleasant shared familiarity with the Brazilian students’ experience required me a different effort in establishing boundaries in order not to blend with the participants’ selves. In all situations, however, I am not able to have it clear what kind of affects I communicate to the participants from my position as a Brazilian woman researcher.

The transmission of affects between the participants of my researchers also affected my knowledge production practice. As Brennan (2004) argues, subjects do not remain unaffected by others’ affection. In some cases, the circulation of energy compromised my ability to dedicate myself further to presenting my research findings. By not being able to create proper boundaries and given the sociability of emotions, my encounters with emotionally depleted subjects limited my reactions to my field.

The supposed difference between the Brazilian women academics I was interviewing and me in terms of career instability was negligible, interfering with how I related to my fieldwork and the collected data. My affective situation, as an economically precarious migrant early career researcher and a gendered body positioned in a “postcolonial knowledge landscape” (Schurr & Abdo, 2016, p. 128) and my identification with my participants’ frustrations with their academic career affected how I “entered the room” and how I could envisage the future of my work.

More recently, my emotional encounters in the field have been marked by inspiring challenging endeavours. Although my aged body and the hierarchical relation between Brazilian women students and given my occupation and title, my previous experience as an international student create a common space for emotional entanglements. Furthermore, the effort made by these students, so Brazilian women’s bodies can belong to Portuguese academia makes me enthusiastic about their experiences.

Emotions move us toward the worlds of others and work to align subjects. However, such a degree of closeness can also be problematic, as it can impact what we can feel in the fieldwork and how we are felt by participants. When conducting the initial analysis of the data I collected in my first project with Brazilian international students, like Leigh (2014) and Morris (2016), I felt awkwardly puzzled by the similarity between students’ perspectives and my own. As this familiarity is rather comfortable, giving it away is demanding.

My past experiences as a Brazilian international student are a constituent of my present position as a Brazilian scholar. As Casey (2000, p. 194) argues: ‘the body imports its own emplaced past into its present experience’ (...) the body's past acts in the present: (..) through its precipitation into the presence of bodily behavior, which enacts the past rather than picturing it”.

Throughout my fieldwork with Brazil migrants in Portugal, my emotional encounters were transformed by the temporal dimension of my migration process and academic path. Looking at the field as a space of emotional encounters and our reactions in the field as emotional encounters as well offers the possibility to rethink our positionality beyond the insider-outsider divided.

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