



A Fieldwork Story Told Through Knitting

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CASTING ON—AN INTRODUCTION

The Hague, 7 February 2019

I'm all packed up and ready to go. Last night while packing I felt really down. I'm exhausted of moving. I'm also scared of leaving ISS, which has become the only constant “home” in my life these past five years. I thought about the knitting circle I will be leaving behind and I really do not want to go. I'm too afraid to go again.

I wrote the above text in my fieldwork diary as I prepared to leave The Hague for the second phase of my fourteen-month multi-sited fieldwork. I had completed the first seven months of fieldwork for my Ph.D. research project on encounters between refugees and host societies in Indonesia and returned temporarily to The Hague in October 2018. I returned from the first phase of my fieldwork feeling disoriented, my emotions as

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dark as the Dutch skies that greeted me at Schiphol Airport. I spent my time in between fieldwork phases, from October 2018 to February 2019, in The Hague to recuperate from the anxieties, insecurities, and insomnia that I had accumulated during my Ph.D. thus far. A mixture of therapy, vitamin D, and a newly found interest in knitting helped me reobtain a sense of balance that I felt I lost during the first phase of fieldwork. I started a knitting and crochet circle every Wednesday evening at my institute and it became a refuge for me. It offered a warm space where a group of women kept their fingers busy with hooks, needles, and yarn; exchanging stories and sometimes snacks. Preparing for the second phase of my multi-sited research brought back with it a deep anxiety towards packing, uprooting, and establishing myself in new cities and new research sites. Leaving for fieldwork again meant leaving my place of refuge.

This chapter will tell the story of my second phase of fieldwork, from February 2019 to August 2019, during which I started a side project of documenting my experiences through the knitting of coloured yarn. My Ph.D. research focuses on discourses of identities in encounters between Indonesian local hosts and refugees. To do this, I combined text analysis and multi-sited ethnography located in five cities in order to understand different reactions and responses of host societies in different contexts in Indonesia. While knitting was not integrated into my research design, it helped me make sense of my Ph.D. research experience. Thus, echoing examples set by many feminist scholars' emphasis on reflexivity and positionality, particularly regarding their intersecting identities and positionalities during fieldwork (Crossa, 2012; Lewis, 2017; Ng, 2017). As researchers go through different life phases our positionality in relation to our research participants can change, along with our approach to the work that we do and access to different groups and information. Ng (2017), for example, chronicles how her life trajectories as a divorced woman to a woman in a relationship with a younger man during her fieldwork, influenced the conversations she had with village women. Reflecting on intersecting and often changing identities that a researcher carries along during the course of our research can help us understand and make sense of what we find.

This chapter will particularly focus on my emotional dynamics during fieldwork, which were triggered by the conditions of my mental and physical health, the need to constantly be on the move to conduct my multi-sited research while simultaneously feeling “stuck” in my current life phase as a Ph.D. researcher. I documented these emotional dynamics

by knitting coloured yarns that represented the different emotions I was feeling and writing in my fieldwork diary, which resulted in the multi-coloured, striped “scarf” depicted in the beginning of the chapter (Fig. 12.1). I will start by discussing the knitting methods I chose to document my emotions. In doing so, I join many feminist scholars (Cotteril & Letherby, 1993; Seidel & Jubas, 2016; Mendez, 2019) who believe in the wealth of knowledge that is offered in the richness of the fibre arts. Then I will discuss the emotional labour that went into fieldwork and the value knitting and other fibre arts play as catalyst for these emotions. I will do this by sharing and thinking through my diary



Fig. 12.1 The multi-coloured scarf I knitted during fieldwork

excerpts and the yarn colours that I associate with them. Finally, I will reflect on what my knitting can say about my fieldwork experience. What I offer through these reflections are further explorations on the potential contributions of fibre arts in informing feminist methodologies.

MY SEED STITCHES—KNITTING, MENTAL HEALTH, AND FIELDWORK

During the first phase of my fieldwork, five people I knew (some closely while others at a distance) had passed away; including an uncle, a good friend, and a former colleague. I did not really understand my own sense of loss. I only was aware of a constant presence of darkness in my thoughts and mood. One day, after my return to The Hague, I had run out of food after staying in my room for almost a week and was forced to go out to do groceries. It was during this walk out that I happened to bump into an ISS colleague who casually asked me how I was doing. I tried to respond, but the standard answer, “I’m fine”, was stuck in my throat and instead I just started crying on the sidewalk. I was obviously “not fine”. This colleague kindly invited me to her home and over a warm cup of tea gently suggested that I might need to seek therapy to unpack the emotions I was feeling. I took this advice.

During a session with my therapist, I happened to mention that I had recently learned how to knit. My therapist advised me to use it as a means to practice mindfulness and to manage the anxieties and insecurities I was feeling. Her suggestion echoed studies that discuss the benefits of knitting to people’s mental health and well-being (Brooks et al., 2019; Potter, 2017; Riley et al., 2013). Using my hands for an activity other than typing and producing usable knitted goods at *far* greater speed than my dissertation gave me a much-needed sense of accomplishment. Until this day I still remember the strong feeling of satisfaction I felt when I finished knitting my first winter hat. This is where I got the idea to start documenting my fieldwork experiences through my knitting.

Before going back to Indonesia, I bought enough yarn that could keep my fingers busy during the next 6 months of fieldwork. Among my knitting loot were ten balls of cotton hand-dyed yarn of five colours: grey, blue, purple, tan, and a subtle orange that came close to light brown. I chose cotton yarn instead of wool because cotton would be better suited for the tropical Indonesian climate. My plan was to associate these different colours with certain emotions and every Friday afternoon to

choose the colours that best described my week to knit into the project. I wrote the emotions I associated with each colour in my diary:

- Purple: Happy days, something sweet, fun, or exciting happened
- Blue: Anxious and worried, feeling that “they’re out to get me”
- Orange: Productive, feeling that “I’ve got my shit together”
- Gray: Really bad week, anger, resentment, feeling like the ‘rain’ just never stops pouring
- Tan: “Meh...” Boring, uneventful week.

Since the complexity of emotions could barely be captured by any single colour, I could choose more than one colour a week. To accompany my knitting, I also wrote in my fieldwork diary about my colour choices and the reasons behind them. I decided to knit as if I were making a striped scarf even though the length produced during fieldwork would not be long enough to become one. In making the “scarf” I chose to apply the seed stitch pattern. I decided on this pattern because, unlike other patterns that I could practically do with my eyes closed, the seed stitch requires me to be present and mindful. It required me to pay close attention to each stitch since I had to alternate horizontally and vertically between purl and knit stitches. Seed stitch is also visually pleasing since it produces a pattern that looks like scattered seeds and, unlike some other patterns, does not curl up at the edges.

I returned to Indonesia on 11 February 2019 but did not start implementing my knitting project until 1 March 2019 and did so every Friday until 9 August 2019, which amounted to 23 weeks projected on a striped “scarf”. These Friday afternoon rituals were cathartic for me, the knitting project became an outlet to manage the emotions that were partial to fieldwork but often excluded from its retelling. I did this without any intention of sharing what I had made in my dissertation or other forms of publications. However, when I looked at the finished product at the end of the second phase of fieldwork, I felt there was a story to tell in the yarn I had knitted.

Storytelling is at the heart of feminist politics and methods, through which emotions that are often fleeting and abstract can be given centre stage (Harcourt et al., 2015: 164). Feminist methodologies offer space to explore creative avenues to approaching and understanding knowledge beyond the rigidity of the academic voice many of us have been trained in. Reflecting and analysing fieldwork experiences is also essentially a telling

and/or retelling of stories through which researchers engage actively with a triad of memory, imagination, and emotions (Tonkin, 2005: 64). In the retelling of stories, emotions that are sensed in our bodies go through the cognitive process of being assigned with meaning through written words with the hopes that readers can relate with what we were feeling. By knitting my emotions using coloured yarn, I go through the process of feeling emotions in my body, cognitively assigning them colour and meaning, and mindfully grounding myself through the experience of crossing my knitting needles and carrying my yarn along my rows of seed stitches. The striped “scarf” I produced, therefore, is a reification of my fieldwork emotions.

CROSSING NEEDLES, CARRYING YARN—MY FIELDWORK STORY

Despite my fears and anxieties of leaving the safe spaces I cultivated during my time in The Hague, I started my fieldwork with high spirits. I went back to rent the room in Cisarua, Bogor, and took up again the position as a volunteer teacher at the Refugee Learning Centre (RLC) that I did during the first phase of fieldwork. It was as if I was picking up where I had left off but with new energy. I wrote in my diary:

Week 1 (1-7 March 2019) – Purple and Orange

The week started with moving back into and teaching at Cisarua, Bogor. It felt SO GOOD to be back at RLC and seeing my class. We have a total of fifteen participants. We are using a new book which is so much fun because it allowed more meaningful discussions in comprehending the text.

This week I also started a more structured interview process, walking to two of the nearest village head offices. I was very happy that the officials at Batulayang and Cibereum were open to be interviewed by me. Sometimes I just need to put myself out there more and speak up to get results.

By the end of my fieldwork, it became clear purple and orange were two colours that often went together. My emotions were highly dependent on my sense of accomplishment. A repeated theme in my fieldwork diaries was the awkwardness of interviews and my successes and failures in getting over my own timidity in approaching strangers to request one. Taking the

time to knit and write about my emotions allowed me to take awareness to celebrate my small successes.

Meanwhile, blue, grey, and tan were colours that also often came together. In stark contrast to my first week, I wrote about my second:

Week 2 (8-15 March 2019) – Blue, Grey, and Tan

This week felt quite meh... I wasn't very productive. During the weekend my parents came to Bogor. I mainly spent time with my mom and even though I had a good time with her, this always stirs a mixture of emotions especially considering the upcoming elections and our different political views. I think we all tried our best to avoid this topic of conversation.

Overall, this second week is going fine. However, if I were to be honest, I'm procrastinating going to Medan. Packing and moving again scares me.

It is common especially in ethnographic research to have stretches of time when there aren't any interviews scheduled or activities to observe and participate in. Moreover, doing research in my own country meant that I wanted to make sure to balance my time with my family and friends, despite the backdrop of the polarising 2019 elections in Indonesia. These moments were triggering for me, as a lot of my anxieties are rooted in the constant feeling that I am never doing enough: not working enough hours, not engaging enough people, not recording enough interviews, not writing enough. Even though a part of me knew I was gathering the data I needed, there was constantly the feeling that it was not enough—that *I* was not *doing* enough and therefore *I* was not enough.

For me, it is difficult to stop these loops of intrusive thoughts and insecurities. It became worse when I was also not feeling physically fit and could not be as productive as I wished to be:

Week 9 (27 April – 3 May 2019) – Tan and Blue

I've been sick for most of this week. I have splitting headaches and coughs. It has been awful. Nothing can be done. I hate this week and I feel awful. I don't even want to write about it.

During these moments I could not find enough motivation to write, but I still found refuge in my knitting. In fact, I started to knit more rows per week than I had originally planned. I started my knitting project by doing a total of six rows a week. However, by week 6 I felt I wanted to do more. This was partially for visual reasons: the “scarf” was not getting as long as I wanted it to be and I realised by week 4 that I needed to always end

with an even number of rows so the excess yarn for each colour would end on the same side of the scarf. The main reason though was that I just wanted to keep on knitting. While doing research in Cisarua, my Friday afternoon journal-writing and knitting sessions gave me some structure to my otherwise unstructured research process. While sipping a hot cup of tea, sitting outside on my balcony overlooking an informal school set up by a non-profit organisation for refugees in my landlord's bungalows, I would write, think, reflect, and knit. Overtime I wanted to sit and knit a little longer and so my rows increased to become a total of 16 rows a week.

Without me realising it, my weekly presence knitting on my balcony attracted some attention. One refugee from Afghanistan, who later became a good friend of mine, came by my rented room one afternoon when I was knitting on my balcony. She showed interest in my knitting and started to talk about her own hobby of weaving bracelets and writing poetry. She showed me photos of some bracelets she made and poetry she wrote and posted on Instagram and her personal blog. Our conversation about our hobbies evolved to discussions about her experience living in Indonesia, where she had been living for about five years. Without any opportunity to access education nor employment her life felt like a slow and silent torment where she had close to no influence over the direction of her future as long as she was stuck in "transit".

The next morning, as I was heading out for the day, my landlord's wife started a conversation. I was surprised. The year before, during the first phase of my fieldwork, I had tried to interview my landlord and his wife about their experiences renting bungalows to refugees and to the non-profit organisation that had started an informal school there. They agreed to be interviewed but would offer only very short answers without much elaboration. While living in their rented room, our interactions were limited to polite smiles and nodding of heads. That morning, however, she started to chat about knitting.

She went inside her house and came back with a huge plastic bag filled with balls of yarn. It turned out that she enjoyed crocheting. Seeing my refugee friend visit me and try out knitting on my balcony the day before sparked her own interest. She talked about how every week a group of refugee women would come to a gathering organised by the non-profit and did embroidery.

"Did you ever join them?" I asked.

She shrugged, "No. I crochet not make embroidery".

Refugees lived in my landlord's rented rooms and bungalows, their children went to an informal school set up in her yard, and a group of refugee women shared an interest in making handicrafts. However, the spaces occupied by refugees were not spaces that Cisarua locals entered and vice versa. By knitting quietly on my balcony, I offered a side of myself beyond the roles of being a "researcher" or the "volunteer teacher". For people, mostly women, who shared an interest in fibre arts, my knitting created an opening into insightful conversations that were not limited and burdened by the structure and power dynamics of interviews.

Despite what I learned during my therapy sessions in The Hague, as the weeks of fieldwork passed, I returned to the bad habit of entertaining intrusive negative thoughts that often led me down a spiral of insecurities. However, dedicating time to knit and reflect meant that this time around I was quicker to become aware of what I was feeling. I wrote in my fieldwork diary:

Week 11 (11-17 May 2019) – Grey and Blue

I've been having a lot of complex emotions – a lot of internal frustrations. I notice that it comes out as lashing out to people for trivial things. I spent the weekend reflecting on this and realising that actually I needed a new colour yarn: green. I've been having a hard time being happy for other people's successes and happiness. There's a green monster deep inside me whispering suggestions of negativity and the whispering has gotten louder. I've been feeling a lot of insecurities that have been there but growing stronger, especially now that I'm back in Indonesia and can see my peers thrive in their careers. Meanwhile I feel so stuck in this Ph.D. I'm not earning enough, not being productive enough, not having much success in my personal life. Everyone is moving forward, building careers and families, while I'm just floating between my research sites not able to set roots anywhere. I'm scared, so scared, of my future. I can't help but think that maybe if I didn't do this Ph.D. I would have achieved what others have.

Many studies have highlighted the precarious positions that many graduate students find themselves in, as the number of people pursuing doctoral degrees have increased over the years while the number of academic positions decline in intensively competitive neoliberal academic environments and polarising political landscapes (Loher et al., 2019; Nature, 2019; Siegel & Keeler, 2020). Based on a survey of 2279 graduate students (90% Ph.D. and 10% Master's students) from 26 countries Evans et al. (2018: 282) found that graduate students were six times more

likely to experience anxiety and depression than the general population. More and more junior academics and early career researchers are forced to compromise and take up low-paying jobs without long-term security, while navigating power dynamics within and beyond academia. Even with a bursary that funded my research, living, and travel costs, that gave me some financial stability, I struggled to cope with the pressure to collect data, publish or perish, and obtain teaching experience before graduating.

The turbulent emotions between hope and despair when thinking about present and future success and failures were constantly present during my fieldwork and continue afterwards. On my fourteenth week, I felt so horrible that I reached out to my therapist in The Hague who reminded me of the basics of mental health; healthier food, exercise, and meditation. The next day, I woke up feeling better having reflected on areas of my life I felt grateful for. Contradicting emotions between anxiety and sadness would often fluctuate with sudden emotions of joy and gratitude. The colours I chose for the “scarf” and my weekly diary entries bore witness to these emotional fluctuations.

Week 14 (1-7 June 2019) – Blue and Purple

This week started out rough. I felt really blue to the point I needed to reach out to K [my therapist in The Hague]. I feel like a failure. My future is unclear, my relationship of three years has gone down the drain, I feel like I failed to take care of my body.

This morning I woke up with a thought that I'm healthy and happy and I mustn't dwell on what I don't have. Maybe I will indeed fail but then again maybe I won't and isn't a 50-50 chance still something worth hanging onto?

Week 16 (15-21 June 2019) – Orange and Blue

Moved to Medan. Another fucking move. Another fucking city. I hate moving. I hate it.

On the other hand, Medan has been kind.

On one hand, these emotional fluctuations can be attributed to the challenges I faced regarding my own mental health. However, one can also attribute it to the emotional labour that goes into doing research. The need to build rapport and gain trust from research participants, stakeholders, gatekeepers, supervisors, and colleagues often require both conscious and subconscious efforts in managing our emotions. Hochschild (1979: 561) refers to these practices of evoking and suppressing emotions as “emotion work”. She (Ibid.: 563) wrote: “We

feel. We try to feel. We want to try to feel. The social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel may be describable as a set of socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at), rules". She calls these social guidelines to reduce the emotive dissonance between the "want" and the "ought" as "feeling rules", which often reflect patterns of social membership. This emotion work is constantly present during and beyond the various stages of doing research but is not often made visible in the work that we publish. Perhaps, this is partially due to the institutional silences and stigmatisation of mental health struggles that permeate academia, particularly as experienced by graduate students (Siegel & Keeler, 2020). Furthermore, emotions are often left out in the reporting of research findings as we worry that it will be taken as signs that a researcher lacks objectivity and mental strength to "make it" as a serious scholar.

These emotions, however, were constantly present in every page of my diary and every row that I knitted. How could it not be, as I accompanied a refugee friend to visit a psychiatrist due to her own mental health struggles, or when another refugee I interviewed talked about his friend who committed suicide a few months after mine did the same, or when crossing the street in Kalideres, West Jakarta, I coincidentally came across a refugee child that I used to teach and finding out that he was now living on the streets with his family? "Where are these emotions meant to go?" I asked myself as I knitted rows of blue or grey seed stitches.

Sometimes these emotions found relief through the connections I made along the way. While my sense of loss and anxiety during fieldwork cannot be compared to the experiences that refugees endured during their journeys, especially considering my relative privilege as an Indonesian citizen and Ph.D. researcher who travelled transnationally, it inevitably informed and framed my research and the relationships I cultivated. As academic research has become increasingly transnational, researchers' may develop a propensity to emotional identification to groups that become the subject of their study, thus contributing to growing interest in transnational migration, albeit at the cost of omitting other forms of sub-national migration from international research agendas (Elmhirst, 2012). While my research focused more on Indonesians' responses and reaction towards the presence of refugees and I maintained relationships with volunteers and advocates working to support refugees obtaining

rights during their indefinite “transit” in Indonesia,¹ I could not help but identify with refugees I encountered during my fieldwork.

Week 18 (29 June – 5 July 2019) – Blue and Purple

My third week in Medan was a confusing week of emotions. I had just met the family of refugees living in [address of one refugee accommodation] and it was heart-breaking how little help these families were receiving. The non-profit organisations I talked to seem to think that this family only have themselves to blame since they were picky and demanding when local organisations tried to help them. The house where they are living now no longer has electricity and gas. The two sisters showed me how they did crochet work to earn some money. We bonded over knitting and crochet. I decided to order a few crocheted pencil cases from the sisters to bring back to Jakarta. They hugged me as I left.

These positive connections helped balanced the pain I witnessed and felt along the way. Unfortunately, the problem with anxiety and intrusive thoughts is that it does not really matter when good things happen because our minds keep the negative at the forefront of our emotions, eclipsing everything else. Despite these episodes of anxieties, looking at the “scarf” I became aware that there was a lot of purple and orange that were knitted into my fieldwork experience. As the “scarf” grew longer with the waves of emotions woven into it, I would focus on the rows of purple and orange and hold onto them to put my anxieties into perspective. Even now after fieldwork, when I feel stuck in my writing and lost in my own insecurities, I will look at these rows and remember that there is always purple intertwined with the blue.

CASTING OFF—CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Writing on the importance of emotions and reflexivity particularly in researching migration, Breda Gray (2008: 947) wrote: “Research is simultaneously an embodied, emotional, mindful and political activity, and emotions, precisely because they overflow with culture and society (Illouz, 2007), can energize action in the world and are central to knowledge

¹Indonesia does not offer any legal pathway to become a permanent resident or citizen of the country, meanwhile refugees’ opportunities to be resettled to a third country has declines leaving them in a state of limbo (for more about this, see Missbach, 2015).

production”. Feminist methodologies have traditionally engaged in practices that can bring emotions into the forefront of research. My fieldwork was challenging as I struggled to cope with my own emotions and how it influenced my mental health. Knitting became an important outlet to ground myself and avoid getting carried away by my anxieties. It also became a topic for conversation that broke the ice on some occasions, particularly with women who share an interest in fibre arts. More importantly, it became a representation of the emotional labour that goes into doing research. The different rows of colour brought into view the precarity that researchers, particularly early career researchers, experience during and beyond fieldwork. Having returned to The Hague and struggling to finish my dissertation without any promised work security after graduation, this “scarf” continues to be a source of comfort for me.

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