

Book review: Gibson, A. (Ed.). (2022). The Affective Researcher. Emerald Publishing Limited. Pages: 166.

Transforming research (work) with affect

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The *affective turn* was identified explicitly in feminist studies for the first time in the beginning of this millennium. In feminist studies, the meaning of this turn has been interpreted in different ways, for example, by stating that it means putting ‘reason’ in ‘emotion’ or by explaining that these two cannot be separated, the same way that body and mind should be understood as irremovable from each other (Ahmed, 2014 [2004]). Despite different interpretations, affective turn has meant orienting research focus towards affect as a phenomenon to be studied (Ahmed, 2014 [2004]), and more recently studying affect as a ubiquitous part of research and research processes (e.g., Coleman & Ringrose, 2013). In Higher Education (HE) studies, affect has been used as a theoretical lens especially to understand how academic work, like research and leadership, becomes constructed (e.g., Burford, 2017; Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Murray, 2018).

The Affective Researcher, edited by Andrew G. Gibson, is part of Great Debates in Higher Education series. The aim of the series is to offer a forum for ‘research informed but debate driven’ short books to address ‘key challenges to and issues in Higher Education’. This book sits well to this aim and offers interesting food-for-thought, not only to HE scholars but also to scholars in the broad field of social sciences and humanities, particularly those who work with (post)qualitative methodologies.

In addition to the Introduction and concluding chapter written by the editor of the book, Gibson, the book includes four chapters, each of which approaches affect in relation to different parts of research process or work of a researcher. Emer Emily Neenan discusses the benefits of understanding writing (a thesis) as personal and emotional practice, and Quivine Ndomo how to become an affective researcher,

especially through the encounters with research participants. Sarah Healy considers the agency of data and data as more-than-textual in (post)qualitative research, and Samantha Marangell the blurry boundaries of personal and work life and especially how the COVID-19 lockdown disclosed this blurriness.

Becoming with ‘data’

My background is in feminist studies and anthropology, which means that I practice (feminist) ethnography. I have also somewhat familiarized with and used post-qualitative methodology. Therefore, during my first reading on affects in qualitative methodology discussed by Ndomo and Healy, I thought that there is nothing new in their ponderings. During my following readings, I became intrigued, especially, with their notions on ‘biographical bodies’ (Ndomo, p. 69) and that ‘taming data’ could be even harmful (Healy, p. 107). For me, using the concepts of ‘data’ and even ‘research material’ to describe my encounters with people and my being-with research participants during fieldwork, has always felt uncomfortable. These two articles made me understand better my own uneasy feelings while doing research, feelings that I have also experienced as ‘unsuitable’ for a researcher. Considering these feelings and their doings is significant and helpful particularly to those researchers who are doing their first qualitative studies, like doctoral researchers, but also to those researchers who have ignored them in their earlier studies.

In their chapter, Ndomo asks ‘How can we become affective researchers doing research in a reciprocal interaction of affects with other biographical bodies?’ (p. 69). They continue by arguing for ‘compassionate data collection’, which means letting go of the methods researcher and the field they represent might be accustomed to, and emphasizing what is the most appropriate method for research participants. This concerns particularly studies where the focus is on the experiences, outlooks and everyday life of participants. Consequently, it means that researchers need to be flexible while forming their research aims and questions, too. Ndomo ended up using biographical interviews in order to understand the background of their research participants, as well as the phenomenon of the ‘integration of highly educated African migrants in the Finnish labour market’ (p. 72). I agree that understanding the histories, biographies and ideas about future are significant and should be considered far more in studies that scrutinize current everyday experiences. Where we come from and where we imagine we are going to have an impact on our present experiences and outlooks.

By the practices of compassionate data collection, like considering the biographies of the bodies that encounter in research process, Ndomo aims to deconstruct and change the power dynamics of research where the framework of

science, in other words, methodologies, theories, contents originating from science are higher in the hierarchy than people under study, their aims and motivations. Affect is central in Ndomo's (p. 70) idea of more compassionate research: it is 'a process of change or transition in the capacities and potentials of individuals'. I think this offers the readers a way toward questioning and changing current practices, ideas and values of (qualitative) research. We always affect and are affected by others, and neglecting this element from our studies means different research results than when we consider them as all other things.

'I never did tame data, I know now that any attempt to do so would be futile – harmful even' writes Healy (p. 104) in *the Affective Researcher*. It should of course be an unquestionable point of departure in any study that we ask the 'right' questions from the data and that we work according to its form and contents. Often, however, as Healy's own experience shows, researchers might try to force data into frames that are unsuitable for it, like squeezing ethnographic data into an analytical tool that focuses mainly on language and text. After realizing this incompatibility and trying to move forward, the researcher has to find another way of 'working data and for data to work with' them (p. 104). Healy found their way from focusing both on senses and especially on sounds, instead of analysing data merely as text, and from art-based practices, but the ways are different to different researchers.

Healy provides a six-point-list of practices and ways of thinking that could be helpful while 'doing' the agential data in (post)qualitative research (see full list p. 102–103). Many of them are surely useful but I would like to highlight the first and the last ones: 'Normalize getting stuck and cracking up as something that can and does occur as we become researchers/theorizers/writers. [Since] sticking point or crack up is an indicator of a profound shift in thinking and/or practice taking place.' (p. 102). In other words, we should not be afraid of getting stuck or cracking up but instead understand them as essential parts of the process of becoming a researcher. Their last point is a valuable part of this becoming, and therefore significant part of practicing science in general: 'Never underestimate the value of process (the doing/making) or overestimate the value of product (the thing done/made).' (p. 103).

Writing and thinking with affect

Most research reports, even in qualitative studies, form around written words, texts. Yet, affect is about corporal, embodied knowing, and as Gibson writes in the book, 'making tacit explicit is a challenge' (p. 24). This is because tacit bends difficulty into current way of communicating our research in scientific forums, like books and journals. This book offers ideas how to include affect in texts: we, researchers

should reflect both the words we are using and the forms of our writing. In addition, Neenan encourages us to show our feelings since the 'idea that 'logical' is in some way the opposite of 'emotional' is a harmful and incomplete one' (p. 39). Often researchers, including myself, have learnt to revise their language by, for example, erasing strong expressions that could be interpreted as too emotional or too personal. Next time you find yourself doing this, pause and reconsider, and ask yourself is it ethical to erase them. Important gatekeepers in making affect visible in our texts, and thus making our studies more multisided and complete, are of course, firstly, supervisors, peers and other scholars in academia and secondly, editors, reviewers, and publishers.

In their article, Neenan clearly shows how researchers make choices in their writing that express also themselves. Finding own way to write is important part of becoming a researcher, as Neenan writes, but as a native speaker (and writer) of a relatively small language, Finnish, I must bring forward that researchers in countries like Finland, including doctoral researchers, are strongly encouraged to write in English instead of or in addition to Finnish, and many of us do. This has an impact on the way we are able to express our feelings, in other words, write affect into our studies. Nevertheless, Neenan's discussions on how to write and structure qualitative studies is an important contribution to this discussion.

The Affective Researcher is a useful guide in thinking what affect means as a theory and methodology and how to become an affective researcher. Affect is not about personal, individual emotions but the ability of being affected and understanding how one affects others. Further, affect is simultaneously embodied and cultural. Becoming affective means considering temporal, spatial, embodied, social and cultural aspects of research encounters, theories and practices. The authors explain well their own take on affect and the shared aim seems to be 'normalizing' affect to become an automatic part of the research process in qualitative studies. The current consensus in these studies is 'affectless', as Gibson writes (p. 148). This might be true in HE studies but in feminist studies affect has been implicit but also quite explicit during past decade, which does not undermine the importance of this book for its audience, however.

We who (try to) practice affective research often face scepticism about the importance of the topic and how we can study and practice affect in our studies. I see this scepticism as tied to not only the 'objective' or 'rational' research, but also to the current academic world where you need to be productive, marketable and fast. Keeping up long-term relationships with your research participants, like Ndomo suggest, or writing poems, like Neenan did, or using art in your analysis, the way Healy did, are all paths towards more valid but also more ethical research (see MacLure, 2013). Yet, we still need to think about how they fit into current academia. Or could they be a way for us to steer away from meritocracy and

economy of scale that prevail in academia, at least in the western world? I agree with Gibson who sees hope essential in all chapters of the book, and that hope comes from the understanding that affect is something to 'embrace', and I would like to think that this hope, reaches eventually all parts of research and academia. Therefore, I think this book is an important reading for everyone working in academia, planning to work in academia, or who have left academia. It helps us all to understand what we are doing and why but also what we are missing.

Author biography

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