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# More than “crumbs”: emotional entanglements and situated ethical strategies in qualitative research

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**Abstract:** Emotional entanglements developing between researchers and participants are an unavoidable experience in qualitative research, whose methods largely rely on emotions, intimacy, and relationships. Despite urged to exercise reflexivity, researchers rarely have the opportunity to deconstruct the emotional aspects of their investigations, which are often perceived as problems rather than as resources. Drawing on feminist methodology, this article argues that emotional entanglements should not be considered as methodological “troubles” that must be avoided at all costs, but as important ethical moments that can help researchers reconsider, re-adjust, and update the tools they employ to collect data while also honoring the subject's (dissenting) voice. Using “confessional tales” (Van Maanen, 2001) written during qualitative studies I have conducted with young people involved in a variety of subcultural practices, I explore strategies for dealing with emotional entanglements in a meaningful and ethical way (Haraway, 2016). In so doing, this article aims to add to the literature on the tensions between formal ethics and ethics in the field.

**Keywords:** qualitative research; emotions; situated ethics; ethnography; relationships

## Introduction

The ethical challenges at the boundaries between research and everyday life represent a longstanding matter of interest for researchers (Burawoy et al., 1991; Haraway, 2016; Cuomo & Massaro 2016). A variety of emotional bonds emerge between researcher and participants during qualitative fieldwork, particularly when researchers employ data collection methods that *deliberatively* seek to uncover research participants' most intimate and significant life moments (e.g., biographical interviews and diaries), to produce in-depth reconstructions of

their everyday lifeworlds (e.g., participant observations) or to develop a bond with participants that is strong enough to sustain a collaborative research project (e.g., participatory action research and collaborative ethnographies). Researchers involved in any of these practices have found themselves challenged by the need to manage the “emotional entanglements” (Laliberté & Schurr, 2016) that develop between them and participants during fieldwork. Is the participant aware of my role as a researcher? Are they sharing information with a researcher or with a friend? Have I shared too much of myself with the participants? Am I getting “too close”?

Although encouraged to practice reflexivity along the research journey (Fraser & Puwar, 2008; Coffey, 1999), researchers rarely have the possibility to unpack the emotional aspects of their studies. As Petitt (2020, p. 1) emphasizes, the “scope for critical self-reflection in the academy” is limited by the need to “neatly package research concerns; locate mitigating solutions before problems emerge through ethics approvals and committees; discuss issues within the confines of short methodology sections before moving on to ‘important’ discussions of findings; and, to express a confident awareness of methodological tensions before fieldwork.” In this context, most—especially, but not only, young—researchers are often left alone in understanding what they should do with the emotional entanglements they have developed during fieldwork, with the moments of intimacy they have shared with participants and with the information they have collected through emotional and intimate bonds that feel like friendships. In other words, while much has been made of the problematic ethical aspects of emotional involvement in research, its potential ethical usefulness is rarely acknowledged and hardly considered in the making of the research project.

Drawing on the literature on feminist methodology (hooks, 1989; Collins; 1991; Haraway, 1998), this article argues that emotional entanglements should not be understood as methodological “problems” that have to be avoided at all costs but should be viewed as a proper ethical strategy. When conceptualized in the research as ethical occasions, emotions and intimate bonds with participants can help researchers to rethink, re-adjust and revise the tools they use to collect data while also recognizing the subject’s voice and dissent by nurturing meaningful forms of mutuality.

To elaborate this argument, I draw upon the “confessional tales” (Van Maanen, 2011) I have written while conducting qualitative studies based on participant observations and biographical interviews with young people engaged in different subcultural practices: political squats, sport fandom collectives, and online pro-Ana communities. These confessional tales will be used to elucidate some of the emotional challenges and discomfort (Haraway, 2016) I have confronted

during my fieldwork as well as to explore potential strategies for dealing with emotional entanglements.

In so doing, this article seeks to contribute to the literature on the tensions between formal ethics and ethics in the field. A growing interest in exploring these tensions and for elaborating shared strategies for managing them can be seen in the variety of terms that have emerged over the course of the last decade that underscore the gap that exists between more general, procedural, and abstract rules concerning good research practices and the emotional messiness of the field. Relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), in-action ethics (Frauenberger et al., 2016), situated ethics (Maguire, 2004), informal ethics (LeCompte & Schensul, 2015), and everyday or ordinary ethics (Lambek, 2010; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) are just some of the phrases used in the literature to draw attention to the distinction between the static anticipatory procedural ethics and the fluidity, unpredictability, and complexity that emerges as researchers enter the field. These expressions stress the situated nature of ethical decisions, which are always contextualized and anchored in what Richards has described as “ethical spaces and places” (Richards et al., 2015), and are made in the moment, on the spot. They also shed light on the existence of “ethically significant moments” that happen during research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262) and invite researchers to watch out for them and to acknowledge their significance. Along with these perspectives, the article aims to explore the role that emotions and intimacy play in the development of a moral connection between researchers and participants and how researchers can analyze how emotions and intimacy as a means to foster moral connection throughout the research project.

### **Defining “crumbs”: emotional entanglements and data collection in qualitative research**

Postmodern approaches to qualitative research have progressively departed from the traditional (positivist) paradigm that advocated a strict separation of researcher and participant to embrace the idea that “involvement and detachment”—both in the field and in subsequent relationships with research participants—were at the heart of any ethical qualitative inquiry (Powdermaker 1966, p. 9). This awareness led to increasing interest in elaborating strategies to deal with the emotional bonds that emerged during fieldwork. A debate on this issue centered on the risks of becoming “too close” to research participants and of blurring the boundaries between everyday life and fieldwork. Two main opposing positions are taken up in the literature. The first advocates for recognizing and sustaining the development of emotional bonds with research participants. The second warns of ethical implications connected to establishing intimate

relationships with participants and of using intimately gained knowledge for scientific ends. It recognizes that emotional bonds could amplify rather than decrease power imbalance between the researcher and the researched subjects.

The first position suggests that personal investment in the research process and a degree of emotional attachment to the field and informants can improve research quality. As Taylor contends (2011, p. 11), “regular and intimate contact not only results in more opportunities to gather data, but it also increases one’s level of perception in relation to body language and non-verbal communication, sensitive or covert topics, false-truths, emotive behaviors, [...] logics of taste and rationality.” Echoing this perspective, Bondi (2003) has suggested that developing relationships with participants allows researchers to establish a better understanding of a participant’s identity, their performative attempts to display who they are and to interpret the complexities, contradictions, and shifts in participants’ behaviors and narratives. Some scholars advocate for recognizing and befriending participants as a research strategy as the “the instrumentalization of friendships for the purposes of achieving a certain control and agreement with the beings implicated in the research should be seen as a normal constituent of knowledge-making, and not as inherently problematic or unethical” (Ramírez-i-Ollé, 2019, p. 312). In developing “friendship as a method,” Coffey (1999) departs from a similar standpoint to argue that the “relationships we create in the field raise our awareness of the [...] dichotomies of, for example, involvement versus detachment, stranger versus friend, distance versus intimacy [...]. Friendships can help to clarify the inherent tensions of the fieldwork experience and sharpen our abilities for critical reflection [...]. They do affect the [researcher’s] gaze and it is important that that should be so” (p. 47). According to Tillman-Healy (2003), the development of bonds within and with the fieldwork reduces the hierarchical distance between researchers and participants and fosters the establishment and maintenance of a dialogical relationship where expressiveness and empathy are encouraged. In this perspective, friendship is not proposed as a tool strategically aimed at gaining more or better “access” to a participant’s world “but is a level of investment where researcher and friendship roles weave together, expand and deepen each other” (Owton and Allen-Collison, 2014, p. 287).

By contrast, the second position underlines the “potentially damaging effects of a research technique which encourages friendship in order to focus on very private and personal aspects of people’s lives” (Cotterill, 1992, p. 597). Amongst others, Gorelick (1991) suggests that relationships developed in the field are never truly egalitarian and warns about their “potential deceptiveness” (p. 469), while Acke et al. (1996, p. 141) argue that “given that the power differences between researcher and researched cannot be completely eliminated, attempting to

create a more equal relationship can paradoxically become exploitation and use.” In opposition to the idea that “in many ways friendship and fieldwork are similar endeavors [as they] both involve being in the world with others” (Tillman-Haley, 2003, p. 732), this perspective maintains that everyday life and fieldwork are distinct social worlds and that research can only simulate the everyday context in which people develop relationships of friendship and mutual trust. While scholars can work to make these interactions mutually beneficial, these relationships are still based on an asymmetrical and one-sided flow of information with one party asking the questions and the other answering. Moreover, as Cotterill (1992) warns “close friends do not usually arrive with a tape-recorder, listen carefully and sympathetically to what you have to say and then disappear” (p. 559). As Kirsh (2005) summarizes “a common thread runs through these warnings: researchers who strive for the benefits of close, interactive relations with participants must accept the concomitant risks,” which not only concern the quality of the research, but also “include the potential for relationships to end abruptly and for participants to feel that they have been misunderstood or betrayed” (p. 2163).

While both perspectives can provide meaningful advice for researchers that deal with emotion-related challenges in the fieldwork, the concrete possibility of their application in fieldwork has been extensively questioned. Adopting an approach that emphasizes the relevance of bonding and relationships has been deemed to potentially lead to a commodification of emotional bonds and to transforming sympathy and empathy into methodological skills the researcher needs to acquire and practice. At the same time, the continuous process of discussion, reflection, and the re-negotiation of consent and trust encouraged by the second position has been criticized for being both unfeasible and counterproductive to the development of a minimum rapport of trust between the researcher and the participants as it gives the former a too intrusive “voice” in the construction of the dialogue.

There is, however, a common assumption underlying these two positions: the idea that emotional entanglements in research can be—to a certain degree —enhanced, prevented or, in other words, *fully controlled* by the researcher (Acker et al. 1996). This idea appears to overemphasize researchers’ preparedness, rationality, readiness, and capacity for reflexivity and overlooks the frequency with which researchers find themselves surprised and unprepared for the emotional challenges the field poses. It is generally impossible for researchers to decide in advance how close they want to get to their research participants as the latter have already moved “too close” to them and by the time they realize this, it can be too difficult and risky to take a step back (Bennett 2002).

Research has widely demonstrated that the risk of getting too close increases under certain conditions such as when the researchers are (or are perceived as) insiders in the studied communities, when they share similar socio-demographic characteristics with the participants or when they have spent so much time in the field that their presence has become natural and unnoticeable. Specific methodological tools also increase risks, depending on the researchers' personality, including their capacity for empathy as well as their tendency to people-please. While researchers must be aware that the risk of getting too close grows under conditions that lower the symbolic distance between researchers and participants, "incidental findings" prompted by intimacy can never be completely avoided and are to be recognized as structural parts of qualitative research with human subjects.

In this perspective, intimately gained information can be conceived as "crumbs" that are produced in the research process. Crumbs are what we produce when eating and they are usually perceived as a waste, i.e., something useless and annoying we need to clean up from the table or our clothes. No matter how careful we are, producing crumbs while eating is almost impossible to avoid when eating certain foods. Like crumbs, the collection of intimately gained information is impossible to completely avoid and control in qualitative research with human beings and, like crumbs, researchers often experience such intimately gained information as a problematic "by-product" that they are unsure as to whether they can actually use in their research.

With the metaphor of "crumbs," I refer to information that participants share being aware of their meaningfulness for the emotional bonds they have developed with the researcher as a friend, unaware of their meaningfulness for the research. In contrast to traces of information that subjects leave behind "unconsciously," crumbs are information *intentionally* shared because of the intimacy they feel with the researcher. Crumbs could be, for example, unrecorded information that participants share at the end of an interview that went pretty well, during which an emotional bond was established so that the subjects felt the willingness to share something more about themselves to deepen the connection they have established with the researcher. It could be a "story" shared on an Instagram account to the "close friends list" that the researcher is included on. It could also be a confession shared with the researcher after returning home from a night out "as friends." While traces often happen because of inattention and distraction, crumbs occur because of intimacy, relationships, and emotions. For this reason, they can neither be thrown away nor uncarefully used.

In this perspective, the following analysis seeks to present some strategies to meaningfully and *ethically* use research findings that stem from spontaneous and uncontrolled emotional



entanglements between a researcher and a participant. In so doing, the analysis aims at recognizing intimately gained information not only as “by- products” of the research process (i.e., something that must be thrown away) while respecting the participants (i.e., acknowledging that such data is not given with consent).

### **Transforming emotional entanglements in ethical occasions**

How can be research crumbs used? That is, how can be information collected through intimacy and emotional bonds be *meaningfully* and *ethically* used in research? To address these questions, I will detail some potential solutions by drawing on the “confessional tales” I have collected over the course of various qualitative studies. Van Maanen (2011) defines confessional tales as an ethnography writing style that is distinguished by “their highly personalized styles and their self-absorbed mandates” (p. 73). Tales are fieldnotes that, using an I-perspective, are meant to clarify how “particular works came into being” and represent “an attempt to explicitly demystify fieldwork [...] by showing how the technique is practiced in the field” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 73).

The confessional tales used in this article represents notes on emotional challenges I have encountered during three different studies I conducted with young people engaged in radical left activism (Pitti, 2018), ultras women (Pitti, 2019) and online communities for girls with anorexia (Pitti, 2011). Each study will be briefly introduced in the following subparagraphs, with a focus on the difficulties that stemmed from the emotional entanglements I developed with my research participants and some solutions I have applied to ethically use data from such relationships. I draw from these studies because my intention is not to provide standard and abstract solutions, but to discuss micro-ethical strategies that, by definition, are always situated and connected to a specific field and a specific relationship between the researcher and the participants. Although the three research projects complied with the rules of formal ethics, the boundaries between everyday life and fieldwork started to fade rather quickly in the interaction because of shared value or socio-demographics similarities between me and the involved participants, my extended presence in the field, my level of experience, as well as my personality. Sometimes, these boundaries blurred so much that I was unable to fully control the development of an emotional bond with the participants. The following is an account of what I tried to do with the “crumbs” I produced.

#### *Occasions to slow down*

One of the most common difficulties related to emotional entanglements in research has to do with the (con)fusion of the roles of researchers/participants and friends. The more researchers become emotionally involved in the study, the more their questions and analyses will combine inputs from their researcher-identity and friend-identity; the more the participants get emotionally involved, the more their answers combine inputs from their participants- identity and friend-identity. Goffman's concept of "lamination" (1974) can help to describe this process and to illustrate what happens when subjects "activate" different selves over the course of an interaction. In research, lamination occurs when information becomes available through different channels that comprise both research activities (e.g., an interview) and "out of frame" activities (e.g., an intimate conversation) as researchers and participants engage with each other. In this perspective, the concept can be used to describe the overlapping of different "voices" in a single speaker and the "entanglement" between research-gained and intimately gained data that distinguishes research crumbs. The layering of roles and voices makes it hard to distinguish what is shared with a friend and what is shared with a researcher, which reveals the tensions and contradiction between roles and generates feelings of uncomfortableness in the researcher who is left to wonder if and how information gained through "out of the frame" activities can be ethically used in research.

The uncomfortableness connected to the overlapping roles was characteristic of my experience in a study I conducted with young people engaged in unconventional political activities.

Between 2015 and 2018, the Horizon project "Partispace – Spaces and Style of Participation in European Cities"<sup>1</sup> studied young people's practices of participation in eight cities across Europe through a combination of qualitative methods including participant observations, biographical interviews, and action research projects. As part of this project, I conducted an ethnography of a leftist social movement organization that had unlawfully squatted an abandoned barrack located in the city center of Bologna and transformed the space into a social center (Pitti 2018). Most of the activists involved in this case study were young people aged between 18 and 35. I was 29 years old at the time, and I shared with the activists not only a similar age but also political values, cultural interests, worldviews, and lifestyles. Like most of the young activists, I was living in Bologna without my parents and the beginning of the research on the leftist social movement organization coincided with and responded to a deep rearrangement of my friendship network. As the activities at the social center filled the time

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<sup>1</sup> This project was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Grant Agreement No. 649416.

emptied by the changes occurring in my personal life, the squatted barrack progressively became my second home while the activists became (and still are) close friends.

Although I practiced reflexivity and understood the risks of “going native,” I could not deny that I had developed emotional entanglements with the activists. Around mid-2017, I realized I had difficulties in writing about the case study as all my data seemed to be crumbs; information acquired through relational bonds that were becoming closer and closer and that I did not feel I could use. This was particularly relevant for the more controversial or unlawful practices the group was engaging in (e.g., boycotts, unauthorized demonstrations, riots with the police). Information on these practices was shared among the more trustworthy and engaged activists, but I was aware of these activities because of the personal relationships I had developed with some of them. I used some of these (anonymized) data at conferences and in lectures, but I could not bring myself to write an article for the project: the more ephemeral nature of the spoken word eased the feeling of uncomfortableness that was unbearable when I attempted to write. After a while, this became problematic for me as well as for the activists, who also expected me to write something.

The solution to this impasse came from one exchange with an activist and a friend. Returning home from a music festival, they<sup>2</sup> shared something very personal about why they had decided to get involved in a particularly risky and unlawful action. This was something I had asked them about in an interview I had conducted with them some months previous. I remembered their answer and I remembered it was vague, abstract and extremely different from the one they were sharing with me now. I could thus understand this “new answer” was intimately gained information that was shared with a friend. Between curiosity and frustration, I asked them why they did not share this personal experience during the interview. Their reply was: “I remember that question, but [what I said] was not everything. I never did an interview before; it was too soon to share this” (Fieldnotes, 2017).

This apparently trivial exchange helped me realize that the research methods we take for granted, that we feel so comfortable with as a researcher, are anything but natural and comfortable for participants and that the time allotted for an interview is rarely enough to allow participants to adjust to the method. As Haraway (1998) notes, despite researchers’ attempts to make participants comfortable, any research setting is at most a well-arranged reconstruction of an everyday setting and a certain degree of uncomfortableness cannot be avoided.

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<sup>2</sup> The they/them pronouns are preferred when the gender of the participants is not relevant to the presentation of the illustrative episodes.

Participants react to this uncomfortableness by either sharing too little or by sharing too much because they feel they have to (Tillman-Haley, 2003). Indeed, “when a participant and interviewer agree to hold an interview, there is an implicit social contract: participants agree to answer questions truthfully and to the best of their knowledge. [...] Of course, participants can refuse to answer particular questions at any time or walk away from an interview altogether, but they rarely exercise these rights” (Kirsch, 2005, p. 2170). These reflections emphasize the need to continuously re-establish consent with participants. But, how can we do this while safeguarding the intimacy?

Since the exchange with the activist/friend, I try to consider crumbs related to emotional entanglements as ethical reminders that invite me to slow down the whole research process. Concretely, this has meant adopting a slower pace in my study by, for example, conducting multiple interviews at different times. This appears to allow participants to feel progressively more at ease with the process of research, to get used to the method and to have more than one occasion to decide how much they want to share with me. At the same time, this solution acts as a reminder for participants that we are still “in the research” while acknowledging the relevance of developing a relationship with them as information acquired through informal conversations can be incorporated in the interviews. In this perspective, if recognized as ethical occasions, crumbs enhance the valorization of the lamination that occurred in the interactions Goffman (1974) observe, making a slow, but conscious incorporation of information that become available via “out of frame” activities into the research frame possible.

### *Occasions for dissent*

To describe the complex and non-linear ways in which researchers and participants relate to each other during research, Strathern (1991) uses the metaphor of “partial connections.” This concept emphasizes the importance of establishing a relationship of empathy and mutual trust with participants, while also recognizing and valuing the limited nature of this connection. As Ramírez-i-Ollé (2019, p. 313) argues, “if it is true that knowledge is always produced in relationship between a knower and a known, it is also true that this connection does not reduce the two parties to a homogeneous whole.” Although we are used to considering partial connections when it comes to researchers and acknowledging that, during the research, researchers do not have to totally agree with what participants think and do, less attention has been paid to safeguarding participants’ opportunities for dissent. While co-production and co-writing can be considered best practices in this light (Harding, 2020), it is not always easy and

possible to involve research participants in the time- and energy-consuming activities of data collection, analysis, and writing. Moreover, these practices often result in mediation between the researchers' perspectives and the participants' views rather than in a full acknowledgement of the latter. As such, according to Pettitt (2020), such practices need to be "weighted against the need to respect the lifeworlds and imaginations of the futures that sustain [...] participants' aspirations and practice" (p.6). Finally, co-writing occurs frequently too late in the research process, after the data has already been collected, and the fieldwork is almost or already finished.

In this context, emotional entanglements between the researcher and the participants can represent an opportunity to open spaces for dissent if the intimate bond is used not as a means to gather (deeper) data, but as a strategy to enhance the possibilities for participants to express their unique point of view and (re)orient the research accordingly.

To illustrate this point, I refer to an episode that occurred during an ethnography I conducted on ultras women (Pitti 2019); i.e., women football fans who participate in organized crews of football supporters<sup>3</sup>. The research, based on overt participant observations and biographical interviews, was conducted between 2015 and 2017 and led me to spend a great amount of time with the young women participating in an Italian ultras group. Although we did not share similar interests (i.e., I had never entered a football arena before this study) or socio-demographic characteristics in terms of age, class, educational levels, a strong bond emerged between me and some of these young women because of our common condition as women in a "male preserve" (Elias and Dunning, 1986). As one of my interviewees summarized, in ultras groups "women are like pandas: so few that we need to bond to survive."<sup>4</sup>

Despite this shared awareness of being a minority within a highly masculine environment, ultras women's position on gender relationships long remained a mystery to me. While I could only see inequalities and power imbalances between men and women participating in the subculture, ultras women rarely discussed gender issues with me. They would often carefully dodge my most direct questions on the matter during the interviews or they would state that they had no clear opinion on the subject. In this context, I found myself stuck between what I was seeing and believing to be true and their silences, which neither confirmed nor openly

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<sup>3</sup> This project was funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, part of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 701844 and by the Humboldt Foundation through the Humboldt Experienced Researcher Fellowship programme.

<sup>4</sup> Quote from an informal exchange with L., ultras woman, 25, June 2015.

denied my perceptions, silences that I (mis)understood as an expression of their fear of appearing disloyal to the group.

A moment of intimacy with the young women proved my interpretation wrong. While talking about boys, men and romantic relationships, the young women started to argue that, on a general level, they found ultras men much more respectful than non-ultras men. In the middle of that conversation, one of the ultras women turned toward me saying: “I am sure you don’t think so, considering what you *are*”; referring to both my role as a researcher and my non-ultras identity (Fieldnotes, 2016). Finding myself unexpectedly at the center of the conversation, I reacted spontaneously saying that I mostly felt safe with ultras men, but that the very frequent sexual comments and compliments made me feel uncomfortable.

The exchange not only reminded me that the participants were more aware of my role as a researcher (i.e., my education, my research focus) than I thought, it also led me to realize that their silences were as much (or even more) connected to me than to their relationship with the men in the group. In other words, their silences were largely the result of a mix of politeness and deference towards me as a researcher, which were nourished by my attempts to stay neutral and by their consequent inability to grasp my own position. In this perspective, this episode illustrates how emotional bonds and moments of intimacy that develop between the researcher and research participants can open a space for the latter to truly express their opinions.

If acknowledged as ethical occasions, emotional entanglements can be used to offer participants opportunities for “dissenting-within” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012) the research process. As rare moments of (apparent) power balance between the researcher and the researched, they allow the latter to express dissent that can (re)orient the research while it is happening. If used in these terms, intimately gained information can help researchers to consider and mediate between their “freedom to produce an account of the subjects’ culture that is sensitive to but also distinct from, and perhaps critical of, indigenous accounts” and “the protection of the autonomy, well-being and dignity of subjects” (Ramírez-i-Ollé, 2019, p. 312). In opening these spaces for intimacy, it is, however, also central to recognize their potential risks. The safeguard of the researcher’s objectivity is often placed at the center of the attention when arguing in favor of maintaining a certain distance from participants. Such distance also, however, has a role in safeguarding the participants’ unique points of view. The disappearance of the boundary between researcher and participant can open possibilities for deeper exchanges, but it also “risks losing the mutual otherness required to sustain the boundary between people, generating a fundamental condition for dialogue: that it occurs between persons who remain mutually other” (Owton & Allen-Collison, 2014, p. 207). Considering this warning, when

boundaries between researchers and participants are crossed and emotional entanglements develop, the participants' possibility to express their point of view is enhanced only if the researchers also play the same game and express their own true opinion and taking the consequent risk of this being (extremely) different from that of the participants.

### *Occasions to give back*

The development of emotional bonds with others implies and increases a person's obligation to the other person as it fosters a deeper recognition of others as human beings (Hochschild, 1979). Applied to fieldwork, this idea has inspired many scholars (Haraway 1988; Fraser and Puwar 2008) to argue that intimacy with participants can potentially extend and increase researchers' ethical sensitivity beyond a moment in the field: illuminating the participant's existence beyond the limited time and space of the fieldwork, emotional bonds in research encourage scholars to reciprocate what they have received by giving back something of what they have studied to participants. Nonetheless, in research entailing strong emotional entanglements, this giving back rarely occurs as an integral part of the research and rarely targets the participants who are directly involved in the study. Dissemination activities are usually conducted after the end of the research and are often imagined for what can be described as "third parties" in the research process – other scholars, policymakers, other people engaged with or in the research subject. Especially in studies on sensitive subjects with vulnerable populations, dissemination activities rarely directly target participants.

This is not always due to inattention or lack of willingness on behalf of researchers who are often driven by a strong ambition to have a positive impact on the studied populations and phenomena and who use their "speaking and writing skills and [their] positions as scholars and critics in ways that transform and uplift [their] research, local, and global communities" (Tillman, 2014, p.294). In my experience, the lack of integrated dissemination activities that target the participants who were directly involved in the research is often related to the inherent difficulty of understanding *how* to translate the knowledge we have produced for those who have helped us produce it. The experience of participants not showing up to a dissemination event organized specifically for them is frequent and often occurs because these events are another time-consuming activity in participants' very busy lives, because they are organized too long after the realization of the study or simply because they are perceived as being overly formal moments. In other words, participants' attention span is often (legitimately) limited and does not adjust very well to the lengthy and complex nature of research practices.

Against this context, the following confessional tale is used to illustrate how moments of intimacy developing between fieldwork and everyday life can be transformed into an opportunity to integrate participants as part of dissemination activities during the fieldwork.

Between 2009 and 2011, I conducted a netnography of online communities of girls with anorexia (Pitti 2010). At the time, young people used blogs in particular as a tool to share personal experiences, while they commonly used instant messaging programs (e.g., Microsoft Messenger) to communicate with other blog users. In particular, pro-ana blogs were an emerging phenomenon in Italy and were used by young girls with Eating Disorders (hereafter ED) not only to share their experiences but also to inform other girls on how to engage in disordered eating. Beyond the few blogs that shared knowledge on ED to help, pro-Ana blogs were ideological manifestos that promoted distorted ideas and behaviors. Around these blogs, communities of girls sharing subcultural practices<sup>5</sup> developed. After the end of the study, which involved observations and interviews with some bloggers, I shared a short and simplified text and a colorful PowerPoint presentation with my analysis with the interviewed girls who, however, rarely shared comments on these documents with me. This left me with a feeling of disappointment that I had been unable to create a meaningful moment of exchange with the participants: while I felt this research changed me deeply as a researcher and as a person, I had the feeling that the girls remained “untouched” by my work. Some months after the end of the research, one of the girls I had kept in contact with got back in touch as she needed to talk. As she openly discussed her problems with me “as a friend,” I started to share my opinion and, without really planning it, I used some of the results of my research to clarify my opinion. After a while, the girl asked me why I never spoke about my research results and when I reminded her about the text I had sent, she said she did not read it as she preferred to hear about the study from her friend and not the researcher.

This episode helped me to realize the importance of recognizing emotional entanglements in research as occasions for creating a moment of meaningful and playful dissemination. As emotional entanglements are integral parts of the research process, recognizing them as opportunities for giving back allows for an integration of dissemination within the research process. This eases the difficulties related to participant engagement in ex-post dissemination activities. This does not imply a rejection of more formally structured, ex-post activities of communication, but their combination with informal exchanges embedded in the fieldwork.

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of such practices are, for example, the use of purple beaded bracelets, the collective writing and sharing of “prayers” for Ana (a sort of deification of Anorexia Nervosa) and the elaboration of a shared language to talk about their ED.



The transformation of emotional entanglements in embedded moments of dissemination respond to the ambition of making the fieldwork a site of “radical reciprocity” where the “fieldwork relationship [is placed] on par with the project” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735).

## **Conclusions**

Through the presentation of examples of ethical strategies deployed to manage emotional bonds in qualitative fieldwork, the present article has sought to contribute to the debate on situated ethics recognizing the ethical value of emotional entanglements in qualitative fieldwork. As Taylor (2011) highlights, “uncharted leap[s] across personal/professional divide [are] bound to cause some degree of both personal and professional crises [...] in relation to professional and personal ethical conduct, accountability, the potential for data distortion and [...] lack of objectivity and possible insider blindness” (p. 10). Despite scholarship that suggests that paying attention to emotions in fieldwork can help researchers to deepen their knowledge of the field (Jensen & Lauritsen 2005), emotions are often hidden when it comes to their studies’ methodological accounts and are perceived more as an ethical problem than as an ethical resource (Kirsch 2005).

Drawing on feminist literature (Haraway 2016, hooks 1989), the article has sought to recognize intimacy, not as a mere tricky burden for researchers, but for how emotional entanglements can help scholars conduct research more ethically when they are considered to be more than potential sources of data. Intimately gained data and emotional bonds can help researchers re-adjust and revise the tools they use to collect data, while also allowing for participants’ dissent from the researcher and creating informal and meaningful moments of exchange and dissemination. As they offer researchers and participants an opportunity to see and to acknowledge “the simple truth that other people are as real as you” (McEwan, 2001, p. 138), emotional entanglements need to be understood not just as a strategy for bettering research results but as “ethically important moments” (Guillemin & Gillam 2004, p. 261). Such an argument does not dismiss the risks connected to the development of emotional entanglements with the participants. Instead, it seeks to foster reflections on the relationships between emotions and ethics in research and to encourage the exchange of practical strategies to handle emotions and ethically but intimately gained data.

In line with an effort to move beyond abstract ethical accounts (Haraway 2016), this analysis adds to other reflections interested in revealing emotions’ “huge potential for developing

respectful and ethical responses to research relations” (Petitt, 2020, p. 2). Indeed, while studies on emotions have vastly explained that feelings are ubiquitous social phenomena (Hochschild 1979) and that they should be understood as sites “through which structures of economic, social, and cultural inequality are experienced, reproduced, and potentially challenged” (Petitt, 2020, p. 3), these reflections are still rarely applied in the research process itself. Recognizing the ubiquity and “stickiness of emotions” (Ahmed 2004), the present article calls for seeing intimacy and emotions as tools to “build novel epistemological techniques for studying the politics of knowledge production and the landscapes of power in which we, as researchers, are embedded” (Laliberté & Schurr, 2016, p. 73).

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