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Gaining 'emotionally-sensed knowledge' as a Participant Observer in a Social Work Context

Hannah Schild, 2025

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Hannah Schild is a doctoral researcher in Social Anthropology and a Junior Fellow at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies. She holds a master's degree in African Studies from Leiden University. Her current research explores parenthood, parenting and planning for 'better future(s)' through, with and for children in South-eastern Tanzania, with a special interest in dynamics of gender and uncertainty.

Abstract

This working paper reflects on doing research amongst social workers involving confrontations with emotionally difficult topics and on the role of emotions in anthropological fieldwork. Despite some advances, emotions remain a crucial and yet relatively underreported topic in scientific writing and an underexplored area of methodological training.

I draw on research I conducted in Lindi, a small town on the South-eastern coast of Tanzania as part of a larger fieldwork project on parenthood, parenting and planning for 'better future(s)' through, with and for children, during which I carried out six weeks of participant observation in the local Social Welfare Office. A majority of cases concerned family strife, often surrounding the dissolution of relationships and ensuing conflicts about child support and custody.

Bearing witness to family conflict and being part of highly-charged counselling situations took an emotional toll on me, changing my perceptions of the field and my research participants. Lacking professional training in the area of social work, I had aimed at being mostly an observer; however, I often became an unwilling and uneasy participant, drawn into ongoing confrontations by clients and social welfare officers alike.

I will reflect on emotions as a factor in anthropological research, investigating how a researcher's emotions can be translated into 'emotionally-sensed knowledge'. Finally, I argue for a better integration of these issues into academic training and writing, especially for the sake of early career researchers who might find it particularly difficult to unsettle 'professional conventions' in their work.

Keywords: emotions, fieldwork, participant observation, social work, methodology

CONTENTS

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1 Introduction

The Social Welfare Office in Lindi consists of a small room, narrowly fitted with two desks, arranged as an L along the two inner walls. Usually, heaps of paper and files are piled up on them, and in the back corner of the room, more papers and cartons are stacked on top of each other. There is one beat-up swivel chair behind and several white plastic chairs in front of the desks – at times up to three crowding the tiny area framed by them. The corner next to the door holds a tall metal file cabinet with a cardboard box and papers on top. Next to it is a low window to the inner courtyard. Even with only the two main social welfare officers and me there, the office always feels crowded and tight. We have to squeeze around each other and shuffle along the walls if we want to get out from behind the desks or move to a different place in the office. Counselling sessions with clients make the space seem even smaller, especially in those cases when members of a quarrelling family or separated parents are coming in to solve their conflicts with the help of ‘the government’ *(serikali),* as they sometimes call the social welfare office. People who have possibly

not spoken in months are suddenly in a space of forced intimacy with each other and with those who are tasked with helping them find resolutions for their disputes.

I learned about the work of social welfare officers as part of my PhD project on parenthood, parenting and planning for 'better future(s)' through, with and for children, during which I conducted six weeks of intensive participant observation in the Social Welfare Office in Lindi, a small town on the South-eastern coast of Tanzania. Social Welfare Offices (SWO, *Ofisi ya Ustawi wa Jamii*) are a government institution currently operating under the Tanzanian Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups (see MOHSW, 2012: xi), with each local government authority on the district or municipal council level being responsible for providing social welfare services to its citizens (ibid.: 2). The functions of SWOs were described to me as ensuring the welfare of people with disabilities, the elderly, families and children, as well as for supervising juvenile offenders. Most of the cases during my time in the office in Lindi – around 48% (Author's own statistic, based on fieldnotes) – concerned conflicts around paternity, custody and *huduma* (child support payments), while the employees of the office predominately engaged in conflict resolution, calling in quarrelling parties via their local chairpersons or their family, and supervised arrangements made e.g. for *huduma*-payments.

My research at the SWO in Lindi was authorised by the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology which granted me clearance for my project. Additionally, I followed the required steps of requesting research permission with the Regional and District Commissioners of Lindi, and with the Municipal Director who then connected me with the local Social Welfare Office. Finally, I was given approval to observe the day-to-day operations by the head of the SWO. I had asked him whether I should ask clients for their consent whenever they came in, which he rejected as not practicable. I usually could not and did not collect any other information about clients except for what I witnessed of their interactions in the office; most of the time, I did not even know their names which were usually not mentioned if they came in for a consultation only. Still, some doubts about research ethics do remain which is why I anonymise the cases I observed as much as possible to protect clients' privacy.

My ethical concerns not only had to do with anonymity and the intimate topics covered in the consultations but also with the role emotions played during them and in their aftermath. As a young researcher, these interactions and situations influenced me in significant ways. At times, I could almost physically feel the extreme tension in the room, as I struggled to maintain a degree of emotional distance to what was occurring in front of me. This raised a number of questions during and after fieldwork in connection to the role of emotions in anthropological research: In the office, I met people 'at their worst', in situations of emotional crisis. From an ethical perspective, I often questioned what I was doing, observing, documenting and basically using their pain for the purposes of my academic advancement. In general, I struggled with my position: lacking professional training in the area of social work, I had wanted to participate as little as possible – also for ethical concerns, as I was in no way equipped to make judgment calls or to know the best ways to handle the conflicts at hand. In contrast to this, I repeatedly became a more or less unwilling and uneasy participant, drawn into the ongoing confrontations by clients and social welfare officers alike. In such moments, I felt extreme reluctance and inadequacy. Similarly,

I was quite unprepared to deal with some of the topics and situations I was confronted with in the context of counselling and conflict resolution sessions.

My own emotional reactions, often connected to identifying with one or the other party in a conflict, also contributed to pulling me deeper into the situations at hand. Still, I wondered whether centring my own emotions when recounting these cases would add value to understanding what was going on. As a PhD student, I questioned whether it would be considered inappropriate and unprofessional to be as candid as in my (personal) notes in an academic text such as this one, especially as a young, female researcher. Would I undermine my claims to be able to generate reliable, scientific knowledge?

On the other hand, one could posit that it would be impossible to credibly conduct research on highly emotive topics and in intense settings such as the Social Welfare Office, without reflecting on emotions. There might be certain things that we can only start seeing and knowing, when we pay close attention to others', but also to our own feelings. My main research question for this working paper is thus: What is and should be the role of difficult emotions during anthropological fieldwork and how can a participant observer's own feelings and personal experiences become analytically fruitful?

In the following, I will recount a particularly challenging case that I witnessed unfolding throughout an afternoon at the Social Welfare Office in August 2022, which serves as an illustration of the issues and questions raised above:

> After having already peeked inside several times, while Robert[1], the senior social welfare officer, has been dealing with other clients, the woman enters the office. She has a very young, almost child-like face and is wrapped in a colourful Kitenge cloth. She tells us that she came to Lindi two days ago from another town, a good 1.500km away, on the opposite side of the country, to find 'mwenye mimba yangu' ['the owner of my foetus'] who is a teacher at a school somewhere in Lindi district and who has since 'refused' the pregnancy which – according to her – is already well advanced. After sending her outside to wait again, Robert tries to reach the alleged father, while the intern Subria explains that she suspects that the 21-year-old has been kicked out by her parents. After talking to the father, Robert starts to prepare a letter to summon him to the office tomorrow. The young woman is called back in, and through questioning by Robert and Subira, more and more pieces of the story come together. She denies being chased away or sent by her own father, recounts that she met the man while she was selling fruit at the university he studied at, and lastly that – when she came here – she found out that he is already married, with two young children.
>
> After a bit of coming and going by Robert and Subira who are occupied with other tasks, there is a knock at the door and a man and a woman enter. It's never explicitly said but it's almost immediately clear that this must be the alleged father and his wife. I am especially surprised about the wife's presence here. He seems a bit sheepish to

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

me at first, not really meeting the eyes of the people in the room, while she simply looks absolutely irritated. An additional chair is organised; he sits by the window, facing Subira; his wife is sitting behind him with crossed arms, while the pregnant woman sits in the right-angle corner the two desks are forming. The tightness of the office and the forced closeness between all parties is intense. Both the man and the pregnant woman are asked for their side of the story - which match in some parts and diverge in others. He does not deny having had a relationship with her, even says that 'nilimhudumia, nilimsaidia '[I gave her maintenance[2], I helped her] while they were together. But now, he says, 'nakinga ndoa yangu' [I am protecting my marriage]. At this point, a first bout of intense anger pulses through me.

His wife, he says, is on the young woman's side and had ensured her that he would look after her if the child is really his. Husband and wife also tell us what the young woman has withheld so far: they had already been at their local chairperson's office[3] and the police gender desk to find a resolution this very morning which would involve him paying for her travels back home and providing financial support until a paternity test can be conducted. They had even called her family and gotten her father to agree[4]. They also say that at some point, the young woman had asked for two million Tanzanian Shillings[5] from the husband to get back home, 'start a life' and buy things for the baby, which Robert admonishes her for ('Umeona maisha ya hapa Lindi?' – Have you seen the life here in Lindi?).

Robert calls the father of the young woman to get his input – now, however, he says that he wants the man to rent a room for his daughter in Lindi, so that she can stay and have the child here. Robert is surprised and in the background the couple starts discussing in hushed voices. The young woman rests her head on her arms, hiding her face. Robert starts to get angry at the other man, 'Huna hata huruma na mtoto wako?' [Do you not have any compassion for your own child?]. He ends up getting so upset that he just hangs up the phone. The young woman is still hiding her face, and the husband says a little smugly 'Hahitaji milioni mbili, ananihitaji mimi' [She doesn't

[2] In this case, '*hudumia*' refers to the maintenance a husband is typically expected to provide for a wife, hinting at a relationship that was more than just casual.

[3] Neighborhood/street chairpersons (*wenyekiti wa mtaa*) are at the lowest level of local government in the Tanzanian system, presiding over a unit of no less than 50 households. Amongst others, they are responsible for maintaining 'stability and peace' and for facilitating access to government services, e.g. by providing the necessary forms (cf. TAMISEMI, n.d.). In connection to the work of the SWO, local chairpersons often were the first point of contact outside of the family that clients approached for help in solving their conflicts or in enforcing demands, e.g. concerning child support. If a solution at this level failed – or, as evidently in this case, was not considered satisfactory by one or more parties – people turned to the SWO in a next step. Local chairpersons were also frequently called by the SW officers to confirm whether someone – usually an absent father – lived in their area and they helped deliver letters to summon them to the office.

[4] The position of the young woman's family of origin concerning her unplanned pregnancy and the steps to be taken as a consequence remained ambiguous throughout the episode and was discussed by those involved at length. Unfortunately, this issue is beyond the scope of the paper at hand.

[5] Around 700€; an entry level school teacher makes around 120 to 160 € a month (cf. Kambuga, 2023: 104).

need two million, she needs me]. Robert – unhappy that she didn't tell the full story before – is also annoyed with the young woman now. I am under the impression that the situation is turning; everyone is talking over her insistently. The husband says that since he has already agreed to pay a certain amount 'Anataka nini tena?' [What else does she want?] and looks around the room, as if searching for agreement from everyone. I try to swallow another bout of anger, biting my tongue to not give a sharp response. At the same time, I am fighting the unreasonable urge to grab a handful of condoms from the box of free ones next to Robert's desk and throw them in his face.

In the chaos of everyone talking at the same time, Robert turns to me and asks what I think what we should do. I am absolutely out of my depth and scrabble together a few sentences about (hurt) feelings being involved and that this could be why the young woman is making seemingly unreasonable demands. Robert reacts with a short laugh that I can't place in terms of its meaning. He sends out the husband and wife, to appeal to the young woman more intensely: 'There is nothing for you here, you have to go home!'

At first, the tears are coming quietly, then she starts sobbing loudly. Robert tells her pretty harshly that he can't talk to her this way and leaves the room. She continues crying. Subira just repeats 'calm down, stop crying now', but doesn't reach out to her physically. I can't stand it anymore just to sit there, lean over the desk, start stroking her crossed arms and begin to talk to her, trying my – absolutely inadequate – best to get through to her. I utterly fail. My questions and words of encouragement never elicit any response, just more sobbing. Subira at some point says that she is going home now. After she has left, Robert comes back in. I don't remember if he tries exhortation again; maybe him and I also talk about the young woman for a moment. I do however remember seeing her slowly pushing her chair further and further back and finally letting herself drop to the floor. I squeeze around the desks (again the tightness of the space!), lift one of the plastic chairs out of the way and – since she is lying half way on her stomach – I try to get her to lie on her back at least. At this point I am worried about the unborn child; the woman is almost hyperventilating as I am starting to panic, concerned that she might go into labour right here and now from all the stress. Her kitenge and T-shirt have slipped out of position and I can see her slightly bulging stomach. I notice that because I am so helpless and don't know what to do I start becoming impatient with her and tell her angrily that she needs to calm down and for God's sake, must start breathing normally. Robert leaves me alone for a bit but returns shortly after. Together we prop her up – she is completely limp and we have to half-pull, half-carry her outside of the tiny office to the hall. We sit her down in a chair but she slips down from it again to the floor and continues sobbing loudly (anger again on my side). Robert is already late for another engagement and decides that all three of them (husband and wife are waiting in the courtyard) should go back to the police. I tell the couple that they should organise a tuk-tuk; when it arrives, the man comes back in to let us know and sees the young woman lying on the floor. He looks at us and her with wide eyes. I feel huge rage towards him and fight the urge to say something vulgar like 'Look, what you have caused just because you couldn't keep

> your dick in your pants!'. I make do with shooting him dirty looks and carry the woman's backpack and her phone behind Robert and him as they lead her to the waiting tuk-tuk. Robert tells the driver to head to the police station. They leave.
>
> We keep standing on the street and an older woman who works at the municipality office and saw the last bit of the drama play out, comes and asks me what was wrong with the young woman. I recount the rough facts of the story and finally allow myself to let out some of the anger I feel towards the man – how dare he say 'I am protecting my marriage' now – if he'd thought about that earlier, the whole situation could have been avoided (the older woman laughs bitterly at this). Especially the flippant question 'What else does she want?' drives me crazy and I wish I could have reacted to it in the moment. Robert says this wasn't the first time that somebody had an emotional outburst at the office; he is going to go now and then follow up with them at the police station later. He seems slightly amused about my anger, smiling a bit. Before he leaves I tell him, (only half-jokingly) that he should please punch the guy from me when he sees him. Robert chuckles. The unfairness, that this man can now just send the young woman away and basically wash his hands of all responsibility, while she has to re-structure her life completely, that in a way her life is ruined now, irks me incredibly, also knowing how hard it will be to enforce child support payments from him to her in the long run.
>
> I walk through town to get something to eat. I am still incredibly angry, aggressive, and at the same time somehow on the brink of tears. If someone should make a stupid remark or catcall me – as the motorcycle taxi drivers at the corner like to do – I fear exploding and starting to cry with rage, something I want to avoid at all costs. I have a call with M. to distract myself and I am slowly able to calm down. As I reach my destination, I can still smell the young woman's sweat on my body and hands.
>
> (Fieldnotes, August 2022)

The role of emotions, particularly those that could be framed as 'difficult' or 'negative', such as anger, rage, helplessness, panic and aggression as in the above case – was an emergent topic during my fieldwork in more than one sense: on the one hand, during my time in the Social Welfare Office, emotions naturally emerged – sometimes overwhelming me – as a part of the interactions I witnessed there. In situations such as the one I described above, I documented the developments of the case in quick notes while it was unfolding, which I later supplemented with more detailed entries in my field diary. In both types of documentation, I found it impossible to exclude observations on how I felt during the interactions – both because it seemed inaccurate and even dishonest to do so, and because I often felt I needed to get these emotions "off my chest". Writing them down was an outlet for me to continue doing research in this challenging environment.

On the other hand, documenting mine and other's (inferred) emotions almost automatically initiated reflections on whether and if yes, what, they could tell me about the research context and topic, my respondents and myself as a researcher. Both in discussing with colleagues after my return and in consulting the growing literature on emotions and fieldwork, I began to investigate my visceral reactions in a process of what some might call 'emotional reflexivity' (c.f. e.g. Genova

and Zotini, 2023). I, for instance, questioned why I was feeling irritated by the seemingly ‚uncaring' behavior of Subira and Robert in the situation described above. Why was it so uncomfortable for me to be pulled 'further in', to become more of a participant? Why did I end up becoming frustrated and angry with the person I was actually empathising with? What larger issues, power dynamics and narratives did my emotions and 'unreasonable', but ultimately very human urges (wanting to throw condoms, wishing for someone to be punched in the face), point to?

With these questions as a starting point, I will briefly explore the literature on emotions in (anthropological) fieldwork and analysis in the following. In a second step, I will give examples of the kinds of knowledge that could be produced through a thorough reflection on my emotions in the exemplary case.

2 From Malinowski's Diary to 'emotionally-sensed' knowledge

Despite some advances, researchers' emotions remain a relatively underreported topic in scientific writing and an underexplored area in methodological training for anthropologists. 'Negative' emotions especially are still a hidden theme in most of mainstream anthropology, and have often been marginalised or made completely invisible. (Cook, 2010: 256; Davies, 2010: 1-3) During the beginnings of anthropology as a discipline and the parallel formalisation of the method of participant observation, the focus lay on 'the mind', rationality and 'objectivity', while possible (negative) emotions were seen as something to be endured but to never be explicitly acknowledged. Lecocq (2002: 273) calls this the 'hidden discourse of fieldwork' which cannot be openly given voice to for fear of losing one's credibility, while Davies (2010: 5-6) argues that this pervasive denial had and has to do with concerns of endangering anthropology's status as a 'serious science'.

Notwithstanding the publication of a number of 'confessional' field work memoirs – a famous example cited by most authors writing on this topic being Malinowski's posthumously published field work diary (*A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, 1967) – there have been few methodological reflections on emotions as possible data points (Davies, 2010: 6-7). If emotions are discussed, especially in methodological handbooks, this was and is mostly done in the context of how they could be "' managed' and 'tamed'" (ibid.: 11). Thus, emotions continue to be seen as something of a 'nuisance factor' in the traditional empiricism of mainstream anthropology and other disciplines that use fieldwork and participant observation as methods (cf. Davies and Stodulka, 2019: 2). Consider an example from Russel Bernard's textbook *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (2018), which according to a blurb for its fifth edition is "a standard textbook for methods classes in anthropology" (Google Books, n.d.): there are no entries for 'emotions', 'feelings', or 'affect' in the index and although Bernard describes the knowledge gained through participant observation as experiential knowledge, i.e., as finding out 'what it *feels* like to' (Bernard, 2018: 272, my emphasis), and at times acknowledges using one's feelings ("Walk [your field site] and write notes about how it *feels* to you.", ibid.: 285, Author's emphasis), he does not explicitly discuss emotions as 'data points' or how they can be used analytically. He suggests to document but keep emotions out of fieldnotes in a separate diary that can be consulted during analysis to avoid personal bias (ibid.: 311) and as "an outlet for writing things that *you don't want part of a public record*" (ibid.: 312, my emphasis). This

methodological neglect of the affective side of research, however, ignores the central fact that fieldwork and the emotions it stirs up – comfortable and uncomfortable – influence the person and perception of the researcher who is after all, as many authors state, his or her own most important research 'instrument' (cf. Davies, 2010: 80; Lecocq, 2002: 273).

Sharing and analysing (difficult) emotions can be especially challenging for young researchers at the beginning of their careers who – for good reasons – fear to undermine their own precarious professional status and credibility by being too candid. To a degree, fieldwork remains a "methodological black box" (Cook, 2010: 245), a box that difficult emotions should ideally also be confined in, with field researchers bearing them in silence as a 'rite of passage' to become 'real anthropologists' (c.f. Graham, 2022: 5, Pollard, 2009: 9, 16; Davies and Stodulka, 2019: 3). Amy Pollard's study on the experiences of anthropology PhD students at several UK institutions in 2009 unveiled a range of difficulties and emotions they faced in the field, ranging – amongst others – from shame and desperation to depression, fear and paranoia. Her research also laid bare the silence about these experiences pre- and post-fieldwork. (Pollard, 2009) The implicit expectations resulting from the prevalent discourse within the discipline and its outputs, that all field relations should be positive (Graham, 2022: 5), the stay in the field 'almost like a holiday' (Lecoq, 2002: 273), in my opinion, contributes to this silencing.

It is true that recently, the topic of the affective dimensions of fieldwork has seen a growing number of contributions – even on 'extreme' emotions such as hating research participants (Graham, 2022). I would however tend to agree with Davies (2010: 11) who argues that such contributions have still not reached the mainstream. In this context, it bears mentioning that, for example, even a large research project like "The Researcher's Affects' led by Thomas Stodulka, which resulted – amongst others – in the comprehensive edited volume *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and Ethnography* (2019), was rejected twice because it was deemed 'unscientific' by senior scholars on review committees (Thajib et al., 2019: 10).

Taking inspiration from radical empiricism and feminist scholarship, innovative contributions like those mentioned above however advocate for using the fieldworker's emotions as data points – as "central to reaching deeper ethnographic understanding" (Graham, 2022: 1) and a "tool for knowing" (Lorimer, 2010: 105) by "translating the researcher's subjectivity into empirical and theoretical insights through self-reflexive engagement with […] fieldwork experiences" (Davies and Stodulka, 2019: 4). The resulting insights from this emotional reflexivity are what Hubbard et al. (2001) would call 'emotionally-sensed-knowledge', defined as insights gained on the basis of the explicit recognition of this epistemological value of emotions (ibid.: 121). "Being emotional", they write, "[…] is a way of knowing about, and acting in, the social world and is just as significant for how we make sense of our respondents' experiences as our cognitive skills." (ibid.: 135) Such knowledge is produced through discussing our emotional reactions to fieldwork situations with others, as well as reflecting on and scrutinising them at different stages of data co-production and analysis (ibid.: 121). Other authors have further advanced these ideas, calling for a systematic interrogation of emotions through their contextualisation, using them to analyse power dynamics and privilege in the field, and investigating the connections between researchers' emotional reactions and their personal backgrounds and perspectives (cf. Genova and Zotini, 2023: 8; McQueeny and Lavelle, 2017: 83, 91)

Using this methodological framework, I aim to contribute to these debates and seek to push emotional reflexivity in ethnography further into the mainstream by exploring the emotionally-sensed-knowledge I gained by reflecting on and investigating my own difficult emotions in the episode described at the beginning of this paper. Since much of the literature cited above mainly engages with the method of qualitative interviewing (e.g. Genova and Zotini 2023; Graham 2022; Hubbard et al. 2001), my own contribution also lies in my focus on the role of emotions in participant observation.

3 Reflecting on Emotions, Gaining Emotionally-Sensed-Knowledge

The episode I recounted at the beginning of this paper could be described as a 'key emotional episode' or a 'raw moment' (c.f. Thajib et al. 2019: 14). Despite the emotional discomfort associated with it at the time (and even in retrospect), such an instance – if taken seriously and considered carefully – can be a source of knowledge about the context it is happening in, the people involved and the power relations between them.

At first glance, one might argue that I did not learn much about the clients and their ways of dealing with and negotiating their conflict; empathy with and understanding of the 'owner of the pregnancy', was made impossible by my intense anger at and irritation with his behaviour. I literally felt like my judgement was clouded by the feelings I struggled to control. Further, I missed out on following up with the couple and the young woman more closely, e.g. by accompanying them to the police station, to find out how the conflict would be tackled there, or to get their contact information for individual interviews. This was due to the fact that as soon as everyone had boarded the tuk-tuk, I desired nothing more than gaining distance from the situation, removing myself physically and mentally to avoid having an emotional breakdown myself.

I would however argue that *because of*, not despite, my strong emotions, I was able to produce 'emotionally-sensed-knowledge' that helped me understand the context and circumstances of the place where I was doing research much better. In the following, I will demonstrate the analytical value of thinking through emotions on the basis of three short examples; considering the role of emotions in the context of Lindi and the Social Welfare Office, in the work of social welfare officers and by investigating the possible reasons for my strong emotional reactions to the situation.

3.1 Contextual Knowledge: The Importance of Controlling Emotions

As I described above, throughout the entire episode, I fought hard to not let what I felt show outwardly. This was on the one hand due to a desire to behave ethically and remain as neutral as possible – by maintaining an 'equilibrium' and behaving professionally, as methodological textbooks tell us to (c.f. Bernard 2018: 175-176). On the other hand, I was acutely aware of what an emotional outburst or a crass comment could mean for my position in the field, as documented in my notes: *"I am worried about my reputation in Lindi if I completely loose it on this guy [the alleged father]."* (Fieldnotes, 11.08.2022).

McGruder (1999: 33-36), writing about Zanzibar, describes that showing emotions – especially those considered 'negative', like anger or hatred – is something that an adult person in Swahili society and culture should avoid at all costs, outlining the high value attached to self-control and concealment here. Strong emotions like grief – but even joy – are thought of as posing a physical

danger, if people let themselves go too much, or show their feelings to clearly publicly. Public crying is thus considered a great shame for adults. Lindi, as part of the historic Swahili coast shares many of the cultural influences as Zanzibar; adults are thus expected to exercise self-control. This was also evident in experiences I had outside of the Social Welfare Office: when a close research participant passed away unexpectedly in her early forties, I joined the gathering at her house the day after her sudden death. Several of the mourners, mostly older female relatives who came in over the course of the morning in shock and grief were instructed to '*kukaza*' (to firm themselves up), as I was as well when I cried, so as to not upset the family further and possibly get them (or ourselves) into a dangerous bodily state of despair (Fieldnotes, 03.04.2023).

In the Social Welfare Office, many times before and after the described case, I observed people on the verge of tears or close to expressing their frustrations in harsher ways. There definitely were raised voices at times but, except from the situation described here, no one ever openly cried or collapsed. The expectation or cultural script (cf. Hochschild, 1983) in the context of the SWO – despite the emotional topics that were discussed – was that people exercise self-control. Robert telling the young woman that he couldn't talk to her in her emotional state and his leaving of the office were clear signs that her behaviour was not considered appropriate in the situation. My own internal struggle to not show outwardly what I really felt (which contributed to my emotional exhaustion at the end), can be seen as part of a learning process in which I began to internalise the cultural scripts of being a 'proper' researcher, but also a 'proper' adult and professional in the context at hand – learning about how and when which emotions could be displayed – or not[6]. The – at times, sharp – dismissal of emotions also had a lot to do with the structural conditions of the social welfare officers' work, which is what I will discuss in the next section.

3.2 Knowledge about Social Welfare Work – Emotions as a Marker of Privilege

As I described above, while in the situation, I was slightly irritated by what I perceived as Robert's harsh treatment of the young woman, and his and Subira's seemingly unemotional reactions to her pain (e.g. not comforting her physically as I felt the urge to; leaving the room). As I reflected on the strength of my own emotions ('angry, aggressive, on the brink of tears') and the sustained way in which they affected me, I realised that allowing myself to feel these feelings was a luxury that Robert and his colleagues could simply not afford if they wanted to keep doing their job effectively. Reflecting on my emotions and the degree of self-righteousness my judgement of their seemingly 'unemotional' handling of the situation further laid bare my own privileges vis-à-vis them: the fact that I could remove myself from the situation in the end and choose not to follow up in the interest of my own wellbeing highlighted my very different social and professional positioning.

Upon Robert's reaction to my rant to the older woman ('smiling a bit') and my suggestion to 'punch the guy from me', I recorded the impression in my notes that "it might feel good to him that someone is living out all the emotions, which gives him the chance to maybe not let it get to himself as much?" (Fieldnotes, 11.08.2022). In an interview that we had previously conducted, Robert told me about the difficulties of his work, confessing that it gives him 'burnout' (Interview,

[6] This also falls under the category of 'emotional labour' required of and performed by researchers during their work (Hubbard et al. 2001: 121, based on Hochschild 1983).

31.07.2022), and at several points in my fieldnotes, I jotted down that he or his younger colleague seemed 'defeated' or 'beat' (e.g. Fieldnotes, 04.06.2022). The emotional weight that their job clearly burdened them with was exacerbated by structural issues like chronic understaffing, the absence of any form of (clinical) supervision, and the lack of effective ways to materially support their clients. In their everyday endeavours, the social welfare officers in Lindi did not have the time and space to consider the emotions of their clients (also evidenced by Robert's short laugh at my suggestion that 'hurt feelings' might be at play here) – or their own, for that matter. In other situations, they explicitly asked parties in conflict to put their emotions aside and 'to sit as parents (i.e. as adults)/as a family', often sending them outside the office to talk amongst themselves when things got too heated or discussions went around in circles. Robert and his colleagues needed to find practicable solutions that all parties could agree to, especially since enforcement remains an issue: in child support cases, for instance, technically, the custodial parent has the right to have a court compel the absentee parent to surrender part of their income as child support. In practice, with people mostly working in informal and intermittent employment arrangements, as well as ample opportunity to 'go underground' to avoid making payments, the way through the courts to receive child support usually did not have good prospects of success. (cf. e.g. Fieldnotes 05.07.2022)

Upon a closer reflection on the case at hand, I was able to identify the decisive turning point of the situation as the moment when it became clear that the young woman – who had Robert's sympathies at the beginning – was not going to agree to a reasonable compromise and had, in fact, rejected a solution that was reached at the police station before. Robert's statement that he 'can't talk to her like this' was thus not only geared towards the young woman's inappropriate loss of self-control, but also an expression of his frustration with her inability and seeming unwillingness to agree to a sensible compromise.

3.3 Knowing Oneself – Emotions Hinting at Larger Narratives and Biases

As researchers – but similarly as social welfare officers (and, for that matter, humans in general) – we can never know everything. I do not and cannot know 'the whole story', the intentions, motivations, or 'true' feelings of those involved in the case that serves as my central example here. I clearly remember however, that the moment in which the situation started to turn on the young woman, together with the flippant comment made by the alleged father ('What else does she want?'), elicited one of my strongest emotional reactions of the day. In retrospect and in discussing my experiences with colleagues, I realised that many of my emotions were based on the larger story I was telling myself about the situation the pregnant woman was in, and how 'we got here', filling in the gaps left by my incomplete knowledge and subsequently interpreting people's actions and reactions based on this narrative.

This larger story was that of extramarital relationships and my perception of men's role in them: Throughout my stay in Lindi, I was frequently confronted with the topic of such relationships in different ways. Both men and women that I got to know, shared that they had them, or I found out from others that they did. Many cases being brought to the Social Welfare Office involved such 'parallel relationships' – the consequences of which I felt rested more heavily on the women in question, in the form of unplanned pregnancies and often subsequent single motherhood with minimal support. My intense anger flaring up at the sentence 'I am protecting my marriage (now)'

and the question 'What else does she want?' speaks to the power of this backstory. Almost immediately upon his arrival at the scene, I subconsciously decided what kind of man we were dealing with: a sleazy asshole who manipulated a naïve young woman into sleeping with him, possibly promising marriage, while his wife was sitting at home with two small children of her own, who now wanted to weasel out of his responsibilities and feigned surprise at the consequences of his actions. Aside from the fact that this puts the women in the story in quite passive positions – which I don't think holds true – I have no way of assessing the level of accuracy of this narrative – and that is also not the point here: The strong emotions I felt concerning the man in question and his actions, upon reflection, should be read as a warning sign to become aware of the larger and highly moralising stories and biases that developed in the back of my mind about the ways men and women related to each other in my field. Re-engaging with the intense discomfort I felt, and questioning the sources of my sympathy and apathy with certain participants of the situation (c.f. Genova and Zotini 2023, 17, 20), serve as further motivation to inquire what motives and intentions men and women might actually have for entering into extramarital or parallel relationships, and what ways they find to deal with their consequences. Such an investigation, however, is beyond the scope of this working paper.

4 Conclusion

How people experience, manage and express emotions as clients and Social Welfare officers in a social work context, frequently parallels what many of us do as anthropologists when making knowledge claims – we try to manage, tame, or push them aside as irrelevant to the task at hand. Returning, however, to the question I asked at the outset of this working paper 'What is and should be the role of difficult emotions during anthropological fieldwork and how can a participant's observer's own feelings and personal experiences become analytically fruitful?', I would conclude that emotions – whether we consider them negative or positive, straightforward of difficult – play a huge role in anthropological research, even if we do not explicitly acknowledge them. I hope that I could demonstrate what kinds of knowledge and analytical depth could be gained when we reflect openly on the things we feel while we are in the field.

This leads me to a follow-up question: How can the role of emotions in fieldwork be better integrated into anthropological training and writing? I strongly advocate for this topic to be included in field preparation classes or workshops where they exist, as well as in consultations between supervisors and PhD students, and possible peer group discussions amongst young researchers; if not for the purpose of highlighting the interpretative value (negative) emotional reactions can have as 'emotionally-sensed knowledge', then at least for avoiding the long-term consequences of entirely suppressing them or feeling that one has to deal with them on one's own (cf. Hubbard, et al. 2001, 121). Lastly, it is certainly important to consider the role of privilege here as well: as a White, European woman doing research in a 'foreign' place I might get away with reflecting on emotions, even with sharing my anger in sometimes crass and vulgar ways. I do however wonder whether the same leeway be accorded to someone doing research at 'home' with more of an (assumed) stake in the situation at hand. What would be the fallout of such openness for a young female Black researcher, a disabled disability scholar, or an Indigenous researcher? (see also McQueeny and Lavelle, 2017: 86-87, 102) Further 'research on researchers' of diverse backgrounds and intersectional positionings and their experiences with difficult emotions in the field, as well as on the structural obstacles to emotional reflexivity in academia would certainly be in order here.

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