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Following the Heart Ethics of Doing Affective Ethnography in Vulnerable Research Settings

Ferdiansyah Thajib

Abstract

This paper chronicles my fieldwork among Muslim queer people in Indonesia. The ethical thrust of “following the heart” lies in the continuous reinvention of research devices in order to keep up with what we feel during, before and after fieldwork, how we are affected by encounters with others, and how others are affected by us. This idea of “following what the heart tells one to do” can be traced back to the old opposition between body and mind, where the head is thought to be rational and cold, and the heart is considered to be emotional and warm. Here, I truncate the metaphor’s dichotomous meaning and discuss the potential values of applying it as an ethics of doing affective ethnography in vulnerable settings. Anthropological knowledge production in vulnerable contexts is not only about providing careful interpretation and representation of the affective experiences of our research participants, but also about making ourselves affectively vulnerable as researchers. This ethics is both a method and a source, remaining existentially inscribed into the researchers’ embodied realities and continuing to shape our academic practices and everyday livings.

Keywords: Anthropology, fieldwork, methodology, affective ethnography, research ethics

I feel quite content with how today went, but at the same time nervous. Nervous about what comes after listening to all these powerful stories. What is one supposed to feel when people revealed to oneself their inner fears, hopes, and dreams; personal tragedies and drama, intimate feelings, and aspirations? What could be done with this abundance of feelings? If my role is to retell these stories, how then to attend to all the details, without reducing them to mere illustrations nor ending up with exaggerations? [...] I doubt whether my memory could retain all the details that made these stories so vividly felt in the first place. There were just so many impressions impressing upon me at this moment, almost too many. Affects inundate me. (Ferdiansyah Thajib, emotion diary entry, 30 July 2014)

This was one of the passages in one of my research tools: an emotion diary, written in the middle of my field research, which focused on the multi-directionality of affective dynamics infusing the lifeworld of Muslim sexual and gender

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minorities in Indonesia. My fieldwork took place for around 15 months from mid 2013 to 2015 in three locations in Indonesia, namely Jakarta, Yogyakarta and – where this particular note was taken and where I focus on in this article – in Indonesia’s northwesternmost province of Aceh. In a later part of this article, I will further elaborate on the diary’s function as a methodological device. Before I do so, I attend to the implications of focusing on affective dynamics not only as a research topic and epistemological premise, but also as an ethical concern.

The entanglement between affects and ethics alluded to in the above citation remains a crucial challenge for anthropological practices of fieldwork and writing. Medical anthropologists Lindsay Smith and Arthur Kleinman address this entanglement through their understanding of ethnographic engagement as an enactment of responsibility to the Other, which:

emerges less from an intellectual or ethical decision and more from these fundamental emotional processes. And yet like life, fieldwork exposes individuals to the complex interweave of values and emotions in the setting of real-world inexpediency and resistance, so that emotion is almost always multiple, complex, and divided. It is this uncertain, multisided, and often dangerous human reality that we seek to privilege. (Smith / Kleinman 2010: 174)

The thorny dimension of anthropological knowledge production that emerges from affective engagements also reverberates through the questions in this article concerning our moral and ethical responsibilities as researchers when research interlocutors share their innermost feelings, intimate life stories and emotional responses: How are we as ethnographers affecting and being affected by such encounters? What responsibilities do we bear when listening and bearing witness to these often emotionally taxing narratives? Other difficult questions may arise later on, when we return from the field and try to transfer these affect-laden moments into writing: What to make of these experiences? How to navigate our own cognitive and interpretive limits in retelling the research participants’ stories? How to take the entanglements of affect and emotion in the field into account, and to translate these embodied experiences and situated knowledges into a language that speaks to those who have not “been there” (Stodulka et al. 2019)? In short, how do we ethically engage with the thick messiness that “the world of affect brought into view” (Stewart 2017: 192)?

All of these concerns are equally pertinent in a research context pervaded by vulnerability (Liamputtong 2007). As I embarked on my fieldwork, assaults upon people of non-heteronormative genders and sexualities intensified across Indonesia in various ways; from the raucous debates in mainstream and social media to widespread stigma and discrimination in various aspects of public life (Thajib 2021, Kantjasungkana / Wieringa 2016). The situation was even worse in Aceh, for a number of reasons that I shall detail in later sections. It was in my encounters with Muslim queer and transgender women there that the ethical dimensions of doing affective ethnography were continuously tested.

This article offers a modest contribution to the discussion around research ethics in volatile contexts, by elaborating an approach which I call “Following the Heart”. This approach entails ways of leveraging the affectivity of conducting research with vulnerable groups of people to enable an anthropological knowledge construction that is methodologically, epistemologically and ethically sound. The idea of following what the heart tells one to do, or in the Indonesian popular saying “*mengikuti kata hati*”¹ can be traced back to the traditional opposition between mind and body, where the head is thought to be rational and cold, and the heart is considered to be emotional and warm. In this article, I want to truncate the dichotomous meaning of this metaphor. I engage with the ethical relevance of following the heart as a mode of homing in on the researcher’s “capacity to affect and be affected” (Massumi 2002: 5) in relation to all the elements of fieldwork encounters, including environments, places, situations, materialities and people, as well as the writing of an ethnographic account.

In the next section I discuss some of the conceptual and methodological bases of affective scholarship and outline Following the Heart as a more specific ethical research orientation. Afterwards, by focusing on two sets of field encounters, I elaborate how ethical tensions in vulnerable research settings can be reconfigured through this approach. It is worth noting here that the focus of these latter sections is not solely about rehashing the content of my emotion diary, as the beginning of this article might suggest. Rather, they provide an account of my attempts to bring documented affects and emotions into dialogue with my observations of the unfolding affective dynamics in the field. The first set of ethnographic examples consists of situations that illustrate the fragility of research relationships in a context where most of the research participants are struggling with structural and interpersonal violence. It draws on the different challenges in initiating contact and forming rapport with the research participants whom I encountered in Aceh. The second set of examples illustrates emergent situations during the later stage of my fieldwork, where both the research participants and I were confronted with issues of safety and protection. This section particularly frames how, by paying attention to affects and emotion, ethical action in research engagement is not only about nurturing a sense of responsibility of the researcher towards the Other in the field, but also about carving out a shared responsibility *with* each other.

Naturally, due to the vulnerability of the individuals involved in this research, all names are pseudonyms, and details of persons, places and situations discussed have been altered. In the final section I provide some reflections on how

1 This is a transcultural translation, as in Indonesian and in the broader Malay-speaking world, *hati* literally means the “liver”, while the English word “heart” translates as *jantung*. But in Indonesian popular culture, *hati* is understood as the heart, which is metaphorically expressed in various world languages as the seat of emotions.

the already established understanding of research ethics involving vulnerable populations can be further enhanced by embracing the open-ended, unsettling and incomplete facets of *Following the Heart* as an ethical orientation of affective research.

Doing affective fieldwork

Scholars in various disciplines have recently introduced the term “affective ethnography” to describe emerging research practices that acknowledge the centrality of affect and emotions in knowledge production (Gherardi 2019, Rai 2019). My approach falls in line with this contemporary scholarship as I embrace the affective dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork as a guiding principle in conducting research. This framing may prompt debate, especially since some would argue that all ethnography involves affective engagement; thus, adding the label “affective” is somewhat tautological. But to me this framework is particularly useful for contemplating the ethical potential of paying attention to the affective dynamics that infuse research engagement in vulnerable settings and with vulnerable subjects.

In the field of organisation studies, Silvia Gherardi (2019: 742) defines affective ethnography as “as a style of performative ethnographic process that relies on the researcher’s capacity to affect and be affected in order to produce interpretations that may transform the things they interpret”. This research practice, she continues “acknowledges that all elements – texts, actors, materialities, language, agencies – are already entangled in complex ways and that they should be read in their intra-actions, through one another, as data in motion/data that move”. While I draw some conceptual affinities with Gherardi’s definition, especially in her theorising of affective entanglements as a resource for ethnographic practice, my research practice departs from her framework of “style”. She defines “style” as a set of aesthetics that can be recognised “when you see it (or read it), and the characteristic features are performances that could have been otherwise” (Gherardi 2019: 745). Gherardi’s conceptualisation of affective ethnography is situated in the debate of “post-qualitative methodologies”, which relies on the researcher’s idiosyncratic disposition and personal aesthetics. For me as an anthropologist, however, my long-term engagement with affective ethnography, although similarly based on embodied knowing, has been primed through the quest to foster a transparent and systematic way of understanding the researcher’s positionality in methodological terms.

Two main strands of intellectual projects prefigure this methodological emphasis. The first one is the anthropological debate on self-reflexivity, positionality and research ethics from the late 1970s to the early 1990s (Rabinow 1977,

Clifford / Marcus 1986). The second affinity can be traced back to the endeavours of feminist anthropologists to reclaim emotions as ways of knowing the self and the world (Lutz 1988, Visweswaran 1994, Wolf 1996). The call for a heightened sensitivity to affective dynamics in ethnographic studies found its critical momentum some two decades later, in the works of psychological anthropologists such as James Davies (2010), Dimitrina Spencer (2010) and Maruška Svašek (2010). Their varying lines of argument coalesce around an emphasis that the ethnographers' affective practices and emotional experiences not only provide important insights into the lifeworlds, people, spaces and places they study, but also carry valuable methodological and epistemological import when comprehensively and systematically attended to.

The challenge to advance the methodologically and epistemologically rewarding aspects of field affectivity has more recently transformed into a research paradigm that numerous scholars have dubbed "affective scholarship".² This line of study focuses on the practical implications of taking affects and emotions as sources of research insight. This suggests the elaboration and diversification of heuristics to help ethnographers capture the affective dimensions of research encounters, construct them into knowledge, preserve them as "data", interpret them and convey them through writing.

My own research has benefited from this paradigm, mainly through my involvement in the project "The Researchers' Affects", a collaboration between social and cultural anthropology, literature, science and primatology based at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, and the University of Bern, Switzerland.³ Through this project, I was able to study the relevance of affectivity for fieldwork and ethnography from various angles, including from an ethical perspective. For a research practice that takes seriously the affective valence of fieldwork, to exclusively give accounts of how research interlocutors experience suffering, despair, joy or mourning without making ourselves vulnerable as ethnographers is tantamount to exploitative research conduct. What is at stake here is "the risk of reproducing simplifying dichotomies by putting them into emotional 'hot seats,' and presenting the anthropological persona as 'cool', and more 'reasonable' in abstracting 'thoughts' from 'feelings,' or 'culture' from 'nature'" (Thajib et al. 2019: 15).

Furthermore, through the Researchers' Affects project I had various opportunities to co-develop methods that can support ways of putting affective scholarship into practice. One of the research devices resulting from the collaborative project is the above-mentioned emotion diary. Designed as a semi-structured device that can be used by fieldworkers to chronicle their affective states and experiences, the accounts preserved in the emotion diary can also be employed

2 Cf. Stodulka et al. 2018, 2019 ; Davies / Stodulka 2019; Thajib et al. 2019.

3 For more information on the project The Researchers' Affects, see <http://www.loe.fu-berlin.de/en/affekteder-forscher/index.html>.

to complement more conventional accounts of the phenomena studied, such as field notes, recorded conversation transcripts, audio recordings and visual images. The diary serves various other purposes, such as providing psychological and epistemological support. I have detailed most of these purposes elsewhere (Stodulka et al. 2019). Here I want to link the diary's strategic purpose of fostering "affectively attuned ways of navigating field encounters" (Stodulka et al. 2019: 285) to the notion of Following the Heart.

As I revisited the entries of my emotion diaries for writing this article, I was struck by the detailed descriptions of fluctuating "field emotions" (Stodulka et al. 2019) or "field affects" (Stodulka et al. 2018) in the records of my research sojourn in Aceh. These comprise fear and anxiety regarding my research interlocutors' safety, elation when a community embraced my presence in the field, bewilderment when people failed to reply to my invitation to meet up, the boredom of waiting until they become available, or disappointments over unkept appointments. Some entries also recount feelings of isolation and loneliness in new environments, the thrill of going to new places and meeting new faces, and feelings of apathy due to physical exhaustion and the constant mental meandering between all these different emotions. In my emotion diaries, I also kept track of implicit, otherwise elusive, moments of shared vulnerability with the research participants. These include episodes when I was swept away by inexplicable sensations while engaging with a certain interlocutor, when I felt changes of intonation in the research participant's voice or my questions were met by silent pauses and other non-verbal responses, or when I sensed the subtle shifts of atmosphere in the interaction between the participants and myself or in our immediate surroundings.

In his theorising of "multi-sited ethnography" George Marcus (1995) has suggested that in a world where spatial and cultural boundaries coalesce, what constitutes the "field site" is increasingly constructed by ethnographers, as they decide which of the various scenes of interaction are relevant for their research. The modes of constructing an ethnographic object in this sense include literally following people, things, metaphors, plots, stories, allegories, lives, biographies and conflicts (Marcus 1995). I invoke Marcus's constructivist strategies here to highlight how the constructed nature of the "anthropological site" often involves a degree of pragmatism and serendipity (Clifford / Marcus 1986, Marcus / Faubion 2009). But rather than framing influential yet unplanned moments of gaining insight as the materialisation of a free-flowing external force, Following the Heart, as I intend it, involves continuous reinvention and modification of our research practice as our bodies not only become physically and emotionally affected by vulnerable situations in the field, but also ethically co-shape these situations.

As I shall further describe in later sections of this article, many of the steps that I took in the course of fieldwork mainly depended on what to me *felt right*.

This approach has coloured my considerations, among others, of how to engage with social relations and material-spatial environments; with whom I established close bonds in the field sites and from whom I distanced myself; and which methods I used to elicit stories from the participants. At the same time, this “feeling right” was never entirely based on my own experience but was generated through moments of sharing feelings *together with* others in the field.

In this sense, Following the Heart is not about discarding research techniques and procedures that have been “rationally” planned and thus replacing them with gut impulses. Rather, it is about embodying and attending to affective relationality as a key resource for ethical research practice in vulnerable settings. I now turn to some snapshots from my fieldwork to illustrate how ethical orientation is crafted by feeling my way through the messy sides of fieldwork experience and relationships.

Grasping through fragile connections

What led me to conduct field research in Aceh was, first and foremost, a longing to learn about my ancestral origins. I was raised in the capital city of Jakarta in an aspiring middle-class family, then I spent a large part of my early adult life in Yogyakarta. Both of my father’s parents migrated from Aceh to the more densely populated island of Java in the late 1960s to seek a better livelihood. I had never visited the north-westernmost part of Indonesia before I started my fieldwork there in 2013. My budding imagination about this place was mainly guided by the stories told by my elders.

As I grew up, it was common for people in my surroundings to make assumptions about my cultural heritage as an Acehnese, determined through my given first name, Teuku, an ethnic title usually given to a male born into a noble family in that area. I remember I often blushed after shaking my head whenever people asked me follow-up questions, such as: Have you been to Aceh? Do you speak the language? During my teenage years, I spent much time following the news of the bloody armed conflict between the military and armed combatants who demanded a fully independent Aceh province. This conflict, which had been ongoing since 1976, had prompted my rather young mind with a longing to better understand the Acehnese people and their culture.

The urge to connect with “Aceh” turned even stronger when the tsunami disaster on 24 December 2004 annihilated large parts of its provincial capital of Banda Aceh and most of its north-western coast (Samuels 2019). As people in the region were still recovering from the tsunami, the approximately 30 years of civil war came to an end in 2005. In parallel to that, as of 2001, Aceh had been granted special autonomy, which allowed the provincial government to

implement Shari'a (Islamic law). Afterwards, reports of corporal punishments for unreligious conduct and violent abuses of human rights began increasingly making headlines in international media whenever the name "Aceh" was brought up, and they continue to infuse the (global) public imagination of Aceh as "radical, dangerous, backward" (Kloos 2017).

Initially my plan was do research only in Aceh and Yogyakarta, but due to unfolding situations that I will explain shortly, Jakarta was added to the list of research locations. As I was about to embark on my fieldwork to Indonesia in early 2013, my plan to investigate the lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities in Aceh generated various cautionary warnings. My supervisors had advised me to skip Aceh entirely if it meant risking not only my safety, but also the security of potential research participants. Colleagues compassionately reminded me to stay alert during my stay in the region, admonishing me to fly out the moment things appeared too hazardous. These concerns were shaped by the escalating violence that sexual and gender minorities had been experiencing in post-conflict, post-tsunami Aceh, and this was compounded with news of the ongoing local government's deliberation of a by-law, called Qanun Jinayat. This by-law was introduced to criminalise same-sex behaviour and, by extension, gender non-conforming expression; violations carry a maximum punishment of either a public flogging of 100 lashes, a fine of 1,000 grams of gold, or 100 months in prison (Human Rights Watch 2016).

The whirlwind of personal expectations and built-up anticipations within me began to unravel as soon as I arrived in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh. My attempts to establish "first contacts" with potential research interlocutors in the city were arduous. At the beginning I was hoping that I could connect with Northwestern Light (NL), the only local NGO which focuses on advocating for the rights of sexual and gender minorities in the region. I followed the recommendations given by a number of queer activists who told me during my transit in Jakarta that NL would be the perfect intermediary for reaching out to potential research participants in Aceh.

While I did manage to have a few preliminary meetings with three NL activists to talk about my research plan, I soon learned that they did not have the capacity to provide the formal support that I needed, except for sharing a few contacts from their personal network who they thought could be asked to join my research. The NL activists stayed reserved with regard to my request for support because the organisation itself was forced to go into hiding at that time, after facing increasing surveillance from the state apparatus and neighbourhood vigilantes. During the few times that I visited the NL office, its door and windows were always completely sealed from inside. The activists even went so far as to burn all their official documents to "remove evidence" after hearing a tip-off that their office was about to be raided by the Shari'a police force, the Wilayatul Hisbah (WH). Not wanting to burden them further with my research

agenda, I decided to independently follow up the contacts that they had shared with me.

Having NL as a reference point indeed paved the way for me to arrange initial meetings with several prospective research participants in Banda Aceh. When introducing my research to potential participants, I usually started by disclosing my personal and professional details. This approach, known as the researcher's self-disclosure in research methods, has been deemed as essentially important in conducting research with vulnerable and hard-to-access groups, in order to "level the playing field" (Dickson-Swift in Liamputtong 2007: 72). But many times, my efforts to initiate a basis for reciprocal sharing with people I met during the early stages of fieldwork in Aceh were futile. Their responses included either hinted, unspoken refusals (such as not responding to my follow-up invitations via online chat or phone messages for another meeting) or, at worst, direct antagonism. One person adamantly refused to be part of the research, for example, because they were suspicious that the research was following a scandalizing agenda. Although I am an Indonesian national, the fact that my research was hosted by a German university made me suspected of reproducing a "Western-biased" approach to representing Muslim cultures in Aceh.

Perhaps even by paraphrasing a part of that conversation here, I am already crossing some ethical lines, since I never did get the person's consent. Yet I do so to illustrate that this strong reaction is only a fraction of the wider social practices of silence and secrecy (see Samuels 2016, Lovell 2007) that are normalised by Aceh's geopolitical conditions. For example, the indifferent responses I received can be understood in relation to the post-tsunami and post-conflict situations, in which many people had become exhausted by the presence of researchers asking various kinds of questions, thus instigating silence and secrecy as strategies of what Sherry B. Ortner (1995) describes as "ethnographic refusal".

Another reason for the climate of discretion can be found in a widespread sense of vulnerability shared among sexual and gender minorities in Aceh in the face of increasing stigma and public persecution. On the one hand, I have accepted the fact that my research topic entails the risk of what scholars have described as "stigma contagion" (Kirby / Corzine 1981, Liamputtong 2007). This means that the researcher shares the stigma of the population that they study. But on the other hand, this "guilt of association" may extend to the research participants. Being seen around someone whose topic of research is considered a social taboo may consequentially expose vulnerable individuals to further risks of unwanted disclosure.

After spending almost two months looking for research participants, I finally met Denny, a 23-year self-identified gay man who welcomed me to join in his everyday activities. I often tagged along when he met different groups of friends to hang out (*nongkrong*) in the *warung kupa* (coffee shop). In Acehnese urban

settings, the *warung kopi* is the main gathering place for young people. One of the most salient features of these coffee shops is the limited access for women into these spaces (Siapno 2002). This gendered public space often helped to conceal the (homo-)sexualised aspects of the interactions within the particular group of men I spent time with in the region.

To accommodate the contingent nature of social space while protecting the physical and psychological well-being of the research participants, I employed a certain degree of adaptability in order to befit and respect the participants' mobility, their sense of temporality and strategies of discretion in circumventing risks of violence. Even in conversations that took place in private settings, I always tried to remain attentive with regard to how the questions or topics that I raised were perceived.

During my interactions with Denny and his friends, for instance, I worked with a common practice of "everyone is in the know" (*tabu sama tabu*) (Juliastuti 2008, Anderson 1966) when referring to same-sex practices and desires. This involved a tacit agreement that we both knew what we were referring to without explicitly addressing it. We employed indirect ways of addressing homosexual identifications, such as by alluding to terms like, *aku kayak gini* ("I'm like this"), *dia kayak gitu juga* ("He is also like us") or *tertarik sama lelaki lain* ("attracted to other men"). This code-switching allowed both the research participants and me to effectively engage in the topics being discussed without having to take recourse to debates on terminology and concept.

Amidst this process of building rapport with Denny and trying to connect with more people in Banda Aceh, I became very ill and had to return to Jakarta to recover at my mother's home. Two months later, still recovering from a nerve-related illness, I decided to return to Banda Aceh to continue my fieldwork. But then I discovered that the few contacts that I had previously built had dwindled, since I had not been able to maintain communication with them while I was bed-ridden. My efforts to restore our relationships during my second visit to Banda Aceh were unsuccessful.

Feeling exasperated, I began to have second thoughts about continuing my fieldwork in Aceh. Not knowing what to do, I reached out to a new colleague from the Netherlands, Annemarie Samuels, for advice. Annemarie was a post-doctoral researcher who at the time was also conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Banda Aceh. After listening to my dilemma, Annemarie encouraged me to endure, while not overstressing myself for not finding enough research participants. Instead, she suggested that I review all the stories that I had listened to thus far, to see whether they carried some important ethnographic insights that I might have overlooked and that still needed deeper examination. Her response made me recollect the stories shared to me not only by the interlocutors I had met in Aceh, but also by a few old friends in Yogyakarta and Jakarta long before the fieldwork had begun. Aside from rekindling my motivation to

keep going in Aceh, the conversation with Annemarie prompted me to involve those who I considered as old friends in my research. I eventually added Jakarta as a “third field site”, which during the initial stage of my fieldwork was more a place of sojourn between my research trips to Yogyakarta and Aceh.

With regards to the ongoing research in Aceh, I decided to widen my search for research participants and visit different peri-urban areas outside of the provincial capital on the northern coast of Aceh. It was during my visit to a district town called Namu that I met Maya and her community. Maya is a 27-year-old *transpuan* (or transgender woman), an acronym combining the first syllable of the English word “transgender” (trans-) and the last syllable (-puan) of one Indonesian word for “woman” (*perempuan*).⁴ She had not only responded very enthusiastically when she heard about the nature of my research but also offered to host my stay in her hair salon, Salon Primadona, during my fieldwork in Namu, which in the end lasted eight months in total.

I was able to establish trust and rapport with her and her group of friends. But even as intimate bonds formed between myself and these research participants, they were often subjected to products of structural violence. The vulnerable nature of the research relationships was mainly manifested through the ways in which the research participants and I affectively negotiated safety and protection in our day-to-day interactions.

Negotiating safety and protection

It was mid-Ramadan, June 2014. By that time, I had been staying and doing participant observation at the Salon Primadona for a couple of months. One afternoon, Nanda, one of the *transpuan* employed at the hair salon, asked me to join her in buying snacks and foodstuffs at the town’s market for the breaking of the fast. Achiel, a *transpuan* who worked at another hair salon located adjacent to Salon Primadona, also joined us. We took to the streets of Namu on two scooters. I rode my own motorbike while Achiel rode the other scooter with Nanda perched on the backseat. That day, Nanda wore a pair of tight jeans, a full face of make-up and a T-shirt adorned with a colourful scarf that draped down her shoulder. Achiel, on the other hand, once told me that she did not like to wear women’s clothes. On that particular afternoon, she was

4 During my fieldwork seven years ago, the term *waria*, which is an acronym of two Indonesian words: *wanita* (“woman”) and *pria* (“man”), was widely used by both ingroups and outgroups in local and national daily parlance. However, today, particularly among Indonesian transgender activists, the term is increasingly being replaced by *transpuan*, as a bid towards self-determination and broader social justice (Hegarty 2022). Following a recent debate on social media regarding the use of *waria* or *transpuan* as a descriptive term, I contacted Maya to ask about her preferred term of description. While she explained that the term *waria* is still used today within her community, she advised me to use the term *transpuan* to educate the public towards social inclusion.

bare-faced, but wore stylish accessories such as fashionable blue-framed sunglasses and high-heeled wedges. She did not wear a helmet while riding the scooter.

When Nanda and Achiel asked me to accompany them to the market to buy food, the string of cautionary comments that I had received from my peers and supervisors before embarking for Aceh flashed through my mind. But there I was, tagging along behind Achiel and Nanda on the road that connected Namu to a neighbouring town further to the south. We had just missed the turn that would take us directly to the market. Apparently, Achiel and Nanda had decided to take a longer route to pass the time. I did not protest and continued following them. From inside my helmet, I felt my gaze shifting. The landscape that unfolded before me looked like a film scene shot in slow motion. Nanda let the wind play with her glaring red hair, dishing out her smiles to passers-by on the sidewalks, while occasionally turning down her head bashfully. Meanwhile, Achiel drove the motorbike single-handedly, waving her free hand sideways, and giggling.

On the sidewalks, people busily bought and sold food. This traditional pre-breaking-of-the-fast activity, colloquially called *ngabuburit*, is popular in many Indonesian towns and cities. I saw many women and men, the old and young, staring at my friends riding the motorbike in front of me. Some looked surprised or laughed, others with indifference, and a few frowned with contempt. People riding in the opposite lane turned their heads, a few even stopped, took a detour, and followed us. I could hear whistles and shouts addressed to the women. And from behind me I could sense a couple of young men on their motorbikes trying to come after Achiel's scooter. I was stunned when some of the chasers not only tried to chat with Nanda and Achiel as they passed by, others even moved their vehicles very closely in order to touch or tap them. I feared that these hands were aiming not only to touch but also to harm them. After a few more kilometres, our small entourage took a detour, only to experience a similar curiosity from the public's gaze. I could easily blend in with other motorbike riders because, aside from my gender-conforming appearance as a cis male, I was wearing ordinary clothes, and the visor of my black helmet was closed.

When we got back from the market, I bombarded Nanda with questions. What was she doing? Was she not troubled by the men who tried to touch her on the motorbike? Was she not afraid that people would hit her? She just giggled and blamed Achiel: "It's all because of Achiel's blue sunglasses, the colour is so striking (*norak*) that people keep on looking at us." She continued:

I'm not worried, because I am from here. People here already know me since I was a child or at least had seen me before once or twice. They are quite used to me; they can accept me. If anyone did try to bother me then most probably that person is not from here, a foreigner, who still sees me as weird or a perfect target for jokes. But I'm sure the local people here will protect me if this happened. (fieldnote, 15 June 2014)

Unsatisfied with Nanda's answer, I spoke to Maya, as I felt closer to her. I asked her why she thought Nanda acted as if she was without concerns for her own safety. To my surprise, Maya also averted my question, by responding: "You have to understand, Nanda is still young and she has never lived outside of Namu before. She still has a strong desire to be seen, who else can appreciate all that effort in making herself beautiful, all that make-up worn and dresses bought if there is no one that could see her?" Maya continued, "I told her so many times to *jaga diri* (protect oneself), but she is still young, so what can I say?" (fieldnote, 15 June 2014)

The above vignette illustrates the push and pull between the rush of concern that I felt regarding the research participants' safety and their ways of downplaying it. Similar events occurred throughout my fieldwork in Namu. However, this does not mean that matters of safety are taken lightly by the community members. Many of them have not only been subjected to injurious speech in public spaces, but also to various forms of physical harassment in their private premises. This is because, on the one hand, *transpuan*-owned hair salons have become the only space outside of private homes where the community members can socialise in relative safety, away from public admonition. On the other hand, the fact that the hair salon is the only place that accommodates *transpuan* sociality has made it a routine target for harassment and control by different power actors, including official state police, local moral police and neighbourhood vigilantes. The fragility of the *transpuan* hair salons cannot be overstated.

In response to the contingent nature of much of the violence that has plagued *transpuan* social existence in Namu, Maya and her friends employ various tactics of self-protection. This is mainly captured by the expression *jaga diri* ("protecting oneself") earlier stated by Maya. This phrase, used interchangeably with other words such as *buat-buat diri* ("behaving oneself") or *jaga-jaga* ("be cautious"), often came up in casual conversation, such as when the speaker and the person being addressed were about to part ways, or the addressee was being reprimanded for trivialising security concerns. *Jaga* means "to protect", whereas *jaga diri* means either "self-protection" or "self-care". In a relational context, the idiom is used to refer to the virtue of knowing one's place in the social world as well as ensuring the maintenance of one's social position before others. This latter meaning is also expressed by the term *buat-buat diri*, which suggests mindfulness in performing / presenting oneself to the world. The phrase *hanya jaga-jaga* carries the double meaning of "taking precautionary steps" while at the same time describing a kind of "just in case" situation, an active anticipation of potential harm.

The practice of constantly attuning oneself to risks of violence is most apparent in situations where *transpuan* collectively navigate the public spaces in

Namu. Throughout my entire stay in the district town, I counted only a few times when Maya, her friends and I actually went out of the salon together during the daytime. The outdoor activities that they did together as a group, and that I had the chance to join, always happened close to midnight, right after the closing-time of their hair salons. On these occasions, we always rode different motorbikes to go to one particular food-stall located on one corner of the streets near the town centre. Once we arrived, the women would banter with each other while enjoying a light meal and unwinding after finishing their 12-hour work shift.

This practice also framed my research interaction with the *transpuan* in Namu. When I made appointments with Maya to meet outside of Salon Primadona during the daytime, for example at a coffee-shop, it was not uncommon for her to change the rendezvous-point at the last minute. She did this to *jaga-jaga*, which usually entailed closely surveying the coffee-shop from afar. If the crowd of men sitting at the designated coffee-shop seemed unfriendly, she would suggest a new location to meet.

My presence as a researcher coming from “outside” was also subjected to such precautionary steps. This is exemplified by an instance during a focus group discussion joined by 13 *transpuan* in Namu that was held shortly after my arrival. When the discussion was about to start, one of the focus group participants rejected my request for permission to audio-record the unfolding conversation. She was worried about her own safety if her voice was recorded and became publicly available, echoing the broader climate of discretion that I described earlier as rooted in the region’s historical context and its increasingly draconian legal landscape.

In a way, I was also brought into the fold of these protective gestures. At the beginning of my stay in the Salon Primadona, I was often startled by the slightest intrusions: the sound of car tires screeching on the intercity road in the wee hours, the curious gaze of the salon customers upon seeing me hanging around the salon day in, day out, the numerous stalkers in cars and on motorbikes that followed our entourage every time we had our routine midnight snacks. I was constantly haunted by stories of local young men or the moral police raiding houses whenever unmarried men and women stayed inside for too long after dark. In the beginning, I tried to repress this anxiety, but then I decided to ask Maya what she told people or neighbours if they wanted to know who I was and what I was doing there. She casually responded, “Don’t worry, I told them you are one of us, of course”. While I have never fully understood what she really meant when she said I was one of them, I would silently repeat this remark like a mantra, whenever feelings of unease began to well up inside me.

Even without having a stranger such as myself spending extended periods in her hair salon, Maya had been pre-empting rumours and gossips from arising

in the close neighbourhood of Salon Primadona. She regularly frequented the neighbours' houses for a small chit-chat. This she did as a part of her tactics of *bawa diri* ("carrying oneself"), which involved maintaining connectivity with social surroundings. But these efforts were not always painless, since Maya told me that often these conversations ended with a bitter aftertaste, especially when her attempts to be cordial with the neighbours were met with grudging responses.

The everyday practices of Maya and her friends in navigating risks of violence during my fieldwork in Namu have compelled me to think about how vulnerability is not fixed universally across time and space, but rather formed relationally. Similar accounts have also been shared by scholars who address the importance of recognising how vulnerability operates beyond categorical labels, as it is constituted through social and spatial processes (Mitchelson 2017, Taylor 2013). The relational emergence of vulnerability is indicated by the friction between my initial assumption that *all* non-heteronormative subjectivities in Aceh were highly vulnerable to violence, and thus in need of protecting, and the ways that the research participants experience vulnerability as a resource for enacting collective agency through self-protection. They did so by employing tactics of negotiating social acceptance with their immediate neighbourhood and by habitually inhabiting the public's gaze. Hence, self-protection for them is part and parcel of communal care work, rather than an enactment of individualised capacity. Maya had even passed on this form of care work to me, the researcher who had the privilege to leave when things got dangerous, despite her own vulnerable social position.

Again, all of this is not to suggest that the research participants are not vulnerable human beings. Nor is it the case that as the researcher, I am ultimately as vulnerable as the research participants. The spaces of difference between us remain noticeable. The point is that for the *transpuan* in Namu, vulnerability constitutes a world of socio-spatial boundaries that demand constant negotiation. The ethical thrust of Following the Heart lies in attuning oneself to this immanent sense of vulnerability. The initial reactions of fear, concern and self-doubt documented in the emotion diary helped me in reconciling with the limits of my actions and positions when it came to the safety of the research participants. At the same time, they enabled me to sidestep paternalistic forms of protection and establish in its place an understanding of how safety in the field is relationally produced and is constantly (re-)made and negotiated between the research participants and the researcher.

Embracing open-endedness

The two ethnographic snapshots above show how my insistence on Following the Heart enabled me to map alternative pathways for engaging with vulnerable subjects and provided the opportunity to investigate how vulnerability and political agency form not a simple opposition, but rather an entanglement. In a field site that is rife with structural and interpersonal violence such as in Aceh, Following the Heart means accepting the possibility of being received with suspicion and doubt by prospective research participants. It remains crucial to attune ourselves to the often-implicit boundaries set by those whom we encounter. This involves not only listening to what is expressed and left unsaid by the interlocutors, but also being aware of how our bodies respond to them. No less important is the affective capacity to hold back, being fully aware that our invitation to participate in the research could still be received as an imposition, or even a safety risk, despite the research's good intentions.

Whereas traditional research ethics guidelines always stress the need for the researcher to protect vulnerable research participants, my evolving relationships with the research participants in Aceh diffused the sole power and responsibilities of the researcher to protect others into a common but differentiated quest for protection that necessarily takes place in relation *with* others. Affectively tapping into this relational vulnerability also shaped other aspects of the research project. In the field interaction, this approach allowed me to sensitise myself to the embodied knowledge of the research participants and to the ways we were mutually affected by each other and by our immediate surroundings as pathways for navigating “hairy” circumstances. In the process of analysis and writing, Following the Heart translates into the challenge to do justice in representing the research participants' multiple engagements with vulnerability. My greatest challenge in the writing process was about finding ways to ethically give an account of how the research participants' everyday experiences of vulnerability are neither about testimonies of victimhood nor tokens of heroism, but that they take place as affective processes where efforts to shun risks of violence, and attempts to endure them together, intermesh.

As a coda to this concluding remark, it is worth pointing out that a few months after completing my fieldwork in Aceh, the regional government put into force the criminalisation of homosexuality through the passing of Qanun Jinayat. Since then, the number of arrests of those suspected of being lesbian and gay in Aceh has escalated. At least four men have been subjected to public caning for engaging in sodomy thus far. Concurrently, especially since 2016, sexual and gender minorities in Indonesia, subsumed under one acronym as LGBT, have become the subject of public controversy on a national scale (Thajib 2021, Kantjasungkana / Wieringa 2016).

This harrowing string of events, in both the regional and national contexts, also exacerbates the living situations of the *transpuan* community in Namu. As I was busy writing my dissertation in the safety of my home in Berlin in early 2018, Maya and her friends had to flee Aceh after five hair salons owned and operated by *transpuan* were raided in a joint operation of the national police force and Shari'a police. They detained 12 *transpuan*, forced them to strip off their clothes and then cut their hair in public. While Maya and her group of friends managed to escape by seeking refuge outside of Aceh and remaining there for a couple of months, upon their return to Namu they learned that gender nonconforming expression in hair salons had been officially banned in Namu as well as in other towns across Aceh. Maya told me that since the ban, she and her friends have avoided group meetings or spending time in the hair salon outside normal working hours. The moral police regularly visit the salon and intimidate her employees into no longer wearing women's clothing. The life inside Salon Primadona, as I knew it, has undergone drastic change.

The vulnerability of sexual and gender minorities in Aceh has reached such a staggering degree that I wondered whether, if I had started my fieldwork only a few months later, it would still have been ethically acceptable to conduct the research in the way that I did. In fact, would it be ethically possible at all to continue doing research when the lives of those being studied are beset by such heavy surveillance and persecution?

The dilemma suggests more than just a speculative musing, as it instils further ethical consideration of the research's "afterlife", especially in disseminating the research outcomes within the academic community and to a broader audience. How to share these insights without causing greater ramifications for queer and trans lives in Aceh? To whom can this knowledge be passed on and to what extent can this be done? In light of these emergent conundrums, I contend that questions on what feels right will continue to shadow every one of us who conducts research in volatile contexts. As many of our research participants still have to endure layers of vulnerability long after we have finished our fieldwork, for us as affective researchers, the ethics of *Following the Heart* will time and time again be put to the test throughout our academic journeys and everyday lives.

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