The emotional entanglements of smartphones in the field: on emotional discomfort, power relations, and research ethics

Abstract

Despite human geographers' growing recognition of the need to explore how digital technologies are increasingly co-producing geographies, the methodological implications of such forms of data production are rarely discussed. This paper explores how smartphones co-constitute fieldwork when they are used as research instruments. Drawing from a research project on young people's nightlife in Switzerland, we use Ahmed's ideas of emotions to show how smartphones are not inert research tools but emotionally entangled in the field. We argue that doing research with smartphones visibly in fieldwork has an effect on the relationships between the people, practices, and places of the field site. More specifically, we argue that these effects of emotions call for a renewed scrutiny of research ethics, particularly as smartphones increasingly become part of research designs.

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Introduction

Smartphones have extensively permeated various parts of our lives, including research practices. In social science, they have become increasingly used as research instruments for data collection (e.g. Gorman, 2016; Kuntsche & Labhart, 2013b; Mitchell et al., 2016; Raento et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2016). They are convenient and within a single multi-media device replace diverse instruments such as pen and paper, dictaphones, and photo and video cameras. They also facilitate interactive contact between researchers and participants (Kuntsche & Labhart, 2012, 2013a; Laurier et al., 2016). While the benefits of smartphones have been amply discussed as augmenting and refining research practices, more critical methodological discussions have recently arisen (e.g. Ergler et al., 2016; Gorman, 2016; Holton & Harmer, 2018). For example, Gorman (2016, p. 226) argues that smartphones are not "isolated artefacts" when used in fieldwork. He illustrates the ways in which they carry various social associations, which have the capacity to reinforce difference and make statements of power. Indeed, smartphones have been linked with a range of controversial debates and emotional tensions such as around privacy, control, and surveillance (Burgess, 2004; Koskela, 2004). Having said this, the methodological implications of technologies to evoke diverse emotions in personal fieldwork has not yet been extensively discussed (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2016). Lobo (2010) argues that making sense of the politics of emotions provides a better understanding of the ethics in research encounters. In her work, she enhances the reflective discussion of ethical responsibility in qualitative research by thinking through her own feelings of, for example, vulnerability and anxiety when doing face-to-face research (see also Kaspar & Landolt, 2016; Laliberté & Schurr, 2016;

Longhurst et al., 2008; Schurr & Abdo, 2016). Consequently, we propose to explore the "emotional entanglement" (Laliberté & Schurr, 2016, p. 72) of smartphones in the field through the lens of emotions. Thus, we contribute to a discussion about how smartphones impact and emotionally shape relationships and power dynamics in fieldwork, and thus in the basis of our knowledge production.

This article stems from and reflects upon a research project in Switzerland that used a smartphone application to collect data on young people's nightlife practices. Hence, we were physically absent from the moments when data was collected in the field by research participants. We draw on Ahmed's (2004) notion of emotion to explore how emotions work through and, consequently, shape spaces of fieldwork when smartphones are used. In doing so, we engage with the methodological and ethical implications of data that is produced through mobile technologies when we as researchers are absent.

Ahmed (2004) moves past the idea of emotions as individual experiences or as properties residing in subjects, objects, institutions, and places. Instead, emotions operate more freely, to the extent that they "may stick to some objects, and slide over others" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8). In Ahmed's (2004) terms, emotions can be "sticky". That is, emotions can become attached to objects, but they can also become unattached. Her point is that emotions are performative in a Butlerian sense (1993): they circulate and work through iterative attachment to certain objects within spaces of encounters. The circulation and effect of emotions, Ahmed (2004, p. 8) argues, allows us to think about the "sociality of emotion", about how emotions organise and shape the way we relate and react to objects and to one another.

Drawing from this, we argue that doing research with smartphones visibly in the field has an effect on the relationships between people, practices, and places in the field. More specifically, we argue that these effects of emotions call for a renewed scrutiny of our ethical responsibilities as "absent-yet-present researcher(s)" (Fassetta, 2016, p. 702; see also Langevang, 2007) in the field.

The study context [*project title*]

This article stems from the [*project title*] project conducted between 2014 and 2017 in the cities of Lausanne and Zurich, Switzerland. It first involved the development[1] of a smartphone app. The [*name of project app*] was designed to encourage study participants, aged 16-25, to complete mobile questionnaires directly on their personal smartphones[2] on Friday and Saturday nights (see also [*author(s)*]). As the study app involved the collection of sensitive personal data such as GPS locations and details of heavy drinking, ethical approval was obtained from the cantonal ethics commissions for the Research on Human Beings in cantons Vaud and Zurich.

On agreeing to join the study for ten nights over seven consecutive weekends, participants (n = 241) installed and subsequently used the study app on their smartphones (for the recruitment and sampling strategy, see [*author(s)*]). Data

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[1] The project team included a development engineer [*name(s)*] who coded and designed the app. Furthermore, the authors of this paper co-developed the content of the app.

[2] For each person who participated ten or more evenings received 100 Swiss francs as incentives and compensation for using their personal device.

were collected using the smartphones' sensors[3] from 8pm to 4am. Additionally, participants provided details of their drinking practices, nightlife places, and social environments using mobile questionnaires, photographs of their drinks, and videos of their drinking environments from 5pm until they went to bed. To better understand the implications of using smartphones as research instruments and of the specific study app, data collection in the field was followed by 40 in-depth interviews[4] with 20 participants from each city. This article draws on the qualitative narrations of the participants, for whom we use pseudonyms in the following. The sample was balanced in gender, age, and educational background. Moreover, it included a variety of drinking patterns and social media usage during nights out. The tape-recorded interviews, 1.5 hours in length per person on average, were transcribed[5] and analysed through iterative rounds of coding using MAXQDA qualitative software. The interviews mainly addressed the participants' nightlife practices and experiences. In addition, we invited the interviewees to comment on their experiences with the [*name of project app*]. Participants' noteworthy narrations about their emotional discomfort when collecting data and the ways in which they responded to these emotions caught our attention. Their echoes were a clear reminder of emotions as silenced or suppressed within mainstream social science (Anderson & Smith, 2001). As Laliberté and Schurr (2016, p. 73) remark, emotions are often marginalised to the "hidden spaces and fringes of knowledge production". Having said this, not all

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[3] These were GPS (Global Positioning System), GSM (Global System for Mobile Communication), Wi-Fi, accelerometer, and Bluetooth

[4] The interviews were conducted by the first author and two research assistants, [*name(s)*]

[5] The transcripts were done by the first author and [*name(s)*]

research participants felt uncomfortable collecting research data through the study app. An online questionnaire that research participants completed after their fieldwork and before the interviews showed a fairly balanced perception of their smartphones' entanglement in the field. For example, responding to the statement "It was hard for me to document my drinks (photos, questionnaire, video) because it disrupted my evening/bothered my friend," participants' mean was 2.9 on a 5-point scale (1 = never; 5 = always). Responding to the statement "I received comments from people who were unhappy that I was making a video with my smartphone," participants' mean was 1.8. These findings indicated how the smartphone was perceived and thus might have had an impact on the data collection. However, they did not reflect the ways in which participants experienced the usage of the smartphone in the field. For example, they did not tell us how participants felt at moments in which a study task disrupted the flow of the night. Nor did we know how participants perceived the comments from people reacting to video making. The interviews were productive here.

It is important to note that the interviews focused on critical experiences rather than on positive ones with the study app. In fact, participants' emotional discomfort when using their smartphones visibly and its effect on research encounters were informative. Thinking through these emotions allowed us to elaborate on the ethical questions arising from using smartphones in the field. The next two sections provide empirical evidence for this elaboration.

Emotional discomfort within moments of data collection

The body of literature on youth and nightlife shows that young people's use of networking technologies produces mainly enjoyable night-out experiences.

Smartphones and their manifold apps for taking photographs and videos and sharing experiences and contents create parts of contemporary nightlife spaces and are complexly interrelated with experiences of elation, pleasure, and social belonging (Brown & Gregg, 2012; de Jong, 2015; Lyons et al., 2017). For most participants in this study, using their personal smartphone to take and share photographs and videos on weekend nights is also a familiar practice. They describe it as about "showing with whom you go out" (Jules) or "surprising" an absent friend with a video recording of a concert (Reese), or experiencing parts of the evening "even though I am not there" (Jamie) (see also [*author(s)*]). Deploying participants' personal smartphones in this specific research context seemed to fit into young people's normalities of going out. One of our study tasks asked participants to use the [*name of project app*] to take photographs of every drink they had in the course of the evening, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic[6]. In this respect, participants mentioned:

> You go to the bar to order a drink. Then it arrives and the first thing you do is to take a photo of the drink. The whole table laughs at you, because that's just not what you do ... unless it looks really special. (Fran, 20 years)

> There were people who said 'are you crazy? Are you taking photos of your drinks?' (Mischa imitates his mocking friends) .... I don't know anymore where I read it but it's considered a disorder. I don't know anymore relating to which country, I think to the US <Interviewer laughs>. It's (considered) a disease. So, the people were joking about that. I said 'no, no, I'm taking photos because I'm part of a study'. I made them laugh, but I had no problem with that. (Mischa, 22 years)

For both Fran and Mischa, taking pictures of their drinks created an emotional reaction. Their friends laughed and expressed surprise and puzzlement ("you're crazy"). Mischa felt personally judged as having a "disorder" by his friends while

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[6] In total, the study gathered 2'540 photographs.

complying with the study requirements. Unlike Mischa, who reported that he "had no problem with that," Fran expressed discomfort. This feeling circulating within the research encounters sometimes inhibited her from using the smartphone for study purposes. As an effect, she skipped the study task in particular instances.

> It was most difficult when we were taking shots. You're at a bar, you toast and you're totally ecstatic. And then you just drink it in a go, because it goes fast. <Interviewer laughs> ... it's difficult to say, 'hey wait, I need to take a photo,' that's a bit silly. (Fran, 20 years)

In Fran's view, integrating the smartphone camera while drinking shots would interrupt the emotional flow. Arguably, the smartphone would be an object of disturbance. As Ahmed reminds us (2004), "we don't have feelings for objects because of the nature of that object" (p. 5). Objects such as a smartphones do not possess specific attributes that lead us to have specific emotions towards those objects; we do not just like them, accept them, or refuse them. Rather, it is a matter of where, how, and in what way individuals and objects come into contact. These associations between objects and emotions are sticky, shaped by past associations. When Mischa and Fran were taking photographs with their smartphones for the study, the private and research contexts interconnected with one another (see also Holton & Harmer, 2018). In other words, the smartphone as a research camera did not conform to past associations of taking photographs during nights out. As Fran says, one does not usually record a drink "unless it looks really special". Deviating from past associations seemed to reconfigure the environment between people and objects. One effect of this was to shape the emotional spaces of fieldwork.

Some participants recounted that third parties asked uneasily "What are you doing?" or "What're you gonna do with that photo?" Such moments required

justification and can "spoil the atmosphere" (Jules). For example, Glen sometimes felt uncomfortable when he explained to his friends why he was taking photographs of alcoholic drinks.

> I explained about the study. Then some asked me whether I had an alcohol problem since I was participating in the study. Of course, I explained that you could also take part as a non-alcoholic. (Glen, 19 years)

Because the smartphone is carried voluntarily by a large proportion of people today, some scholars highlight its informal, familiar, and thus unobtrusive nature when used as a research instrument (Raento et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2016). However, the ways in which the personal device is used is closely bound with associations. In Glen's case, it made him feel exposed, and to some extent vulnerable, to the stigma of problem drinking. Using the own smartphone to collect data was described as making one feel "peculiar", "uncomfortable", "out of place", "silly", "foolish", "embarrassing" or "odd".

Fieldwork involves an emotional entanglement of the person collecting data and the people involved in the field (Schurr & Abdo, 2016). The technologies used in fieldwork, such as the smartphone, also become entangled in the process. Consequently, the choice of technology can actively shape the spaces of data collection. In the case of taking photographs for this study, it meant that participants either took a photograph of their drinks or they skipped the task. Yet as the interviews showed, the reason why they skipped the task was often linked more closely to their social embeddedness than to technical applicability. The next section discusses how this allows us to reflect on ethical questions arising when smartphones are employed in the field.

Developing of a responsible gaze

Along with documenting the drinks consumed, participants were asked to take 10-second video clips of every new place they attended. They were instructed to record a panorama by slowly turning from left to right with their smartphone. Over three months, we gathered 843 video clips of diverse places, including pubs, clubs, urban public spaces, and private homes. While the photographs focused on beverage containers such as glasses, mugs, and bottles, the filming task sometimes required participants to point their smartphone cameras at other people. Some participants were afraid of attracting other people's attention. A few argued that they particularly avoided collecting video clips in private spaces:

> At friends' places, I felt like blocked from making videos. Photos were ok, they are fast taken, I don't need two hours, but with videos I needed to turn (the camera). Then people look at you like what are you doing, you are at my place, why are you filming? So I felt uncomfortable. I thought it disrespectful – Well, I would have had to ask (for permission to film). This is why I decided to make no videos (in private spaces). (Lynn, 19 years)

Lynn felt uncomfortable filming in private spaces. In her perception, taking a 10-second video clip felt like holding the camera for two hours. She reasoned her discomfort with ethical consideration. She felt obliged to ask for consent to record the research video comfortably, from which she eventually refrained.

However, being out at public nightlife venues, some participants, like Elif, felt equally intrusive:

> The thing is, the video itself was not really the problem. But it was really hard to hold the camera for 10 seconds. I had the feeling that I was spying on people, as if I was a policeman from the USSR <laughs>. (Elif, 22 years)

Elif carried out the video task yet voiced discomfort at doing so. In a way, he expressed a sense of guilt at "spying" on others' intimate spaces, even in the

public sphere. Some research participants described attracting sceptical views from strangers. Others spoke of encounters in which people affected by the videoing actually asked them to replay the video to check the content. Smartphones are not neutral artefacts. We found participants to express feelings of discomfort extending to anxiety circulating through moments of encounter when using the smartphone as a data collection tool. When shooting videos, the local and place-based context emotionally affected participants' performance (see also Gorman, 2016). By design, the study app allowed participants to refrain from taking videos at any time, according to the specific situation and their own feelings. In this case, the study app asked for the reason. The three most frequently cited reasons were "ethical" (28.9%), "safety" (28.9%), and "social" (27%), followed by "other" (17.2%), and "legal" (4.9%). These five categories were given and not further specified by the study app. Closer examination through the interviews showed that participants' discomfort in taking a video was closely linked to feelings of obligation. Being perceived as socially and ethically respectful when using a smartphone to make recordings seemed to be important. This sense of obligation affected how some participants took the video clips: "I tried to avoid filming people" (Les), "I think I ensured that I didn't include any faces in my recordings" (Vivien), "I think I tried to film the ceiling (only)" (Sam). Being in a small circle of friends on nights out in particular, some participants felt obliged to inform their friends about why they were filming. Some participants recounted that their friends explicitly insisted that the participants keep them out of the video. Some squawked "NO!!" (Elia reported) when teased with the camera, and others covered their faces with their hands as soon as they realised they were being recorded. Jules reflects these emotional refusals in a broader context:

> You never know where they (the images) will end up eventually. That's how it is nowadays. ... Many people don't like to be in images, for example. Me neither, I don't like to be in an image if I don't know who is taking the photo. Because it can go around the world within three seconds. (Jules, 17 years)

Participants expressed awareness of the smartphones' connectivity. A local recording can connect to public or semi-public networks such as Facebook or Instagram. Arguably, this offers the capacity to individuals with a camera to become active in capturing and mediating pictures to "invisible audiences" (Boyd, 2008, p. 2). Koskela (2000, 2004) argues that this capacity to gaze through a camera lens holds power. In her words, "Looking connotates power, and being looked at powerlessness" (2000, p. 255).

To return to Ahmed (2004), she understands emotions as creating the ways in which we relate to one another. In her understanding, emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies and objects. We may feel attracted to them, afraid of them, or many other ways. Holding a camera creates the feeling of being empowered because one can report from the spot and share at the very moment of data production. Participants in this study were emotionally aware of this power. Jules, for example, expressed distrust of strangers pointing cameras at her, which simultaneously delineates a person with a camera as a gazing fearsome subject. It produces and reproduces an association between the subject and the smartphone camera that is sticky with power and distrust. At the same time, when pointing the camera at people and thus occupying the position of power, participants felt uncomfortable and ethically and socially responsible. Consequently, we witnessed participants of this study trying to develop a "responsible gaze" in the field.

Conclusion

Mobile phones have become omnipresent in industrialised societies and are increasingly part of research designs in social science. While we see great potential for smartphones as research instruments, we here sought to contribute to a reflective discussion of a device that encapsulates the idea that one can "capture life as it is lived" (Bolger et al., 2003; Kuntsche & Labhart, 2013b). This paper has characterised smartphones not as solely "unobtrusive" (Raento et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2016) research instruments but as objects sticky with feelings of unease. This, we showed, had an effect on the relationships between people, practices, and places. More specifically, we argued that these effects of emotions call for a renewed scrutiny of research ethics when we as researchers are physically absent from the fieldwork. Subsequently, we suggest three recommendations that recognise the emotional entanglement of researching with smartphones in the field.

We first acknowledge the implications of interfering in participants' social and emotional spaces when their smartphones are used as research devices. Ahmed (2004) argues that how we act or react to others are often shaped by emotions. This means that what we do in fieldwork is co-constituted by the contact we have within these spaces. Involving smartphones allowed us to enter the field while being physically absent. However, using participants' personal smartphones to collect data also un-fixed their performances within the normalities of nights out. It made the familiarity of smartphone application strange (see also Longhurst, 2016). Some practices, such as collecting specific photo motifs, were perceived as unusual ways of taking photographs and evoked associations that seemed out of place. They created unease and thus difference between the participants and their social environment. One important effect of this is that participants' emotional

responses shaped the data collection. "Emotions are what moves us", Ahmed (2004, p. 171) says. In this sense, we concur with Holton and Harmer's (2018, p. 7) argument against privileging research over nonacademic usages of the smartphone. Instead, when employing personal smartphones as research tools, we suggest conceding and reflecting on the ways in which participants act and react in social spaces within which they and the data produced are embedded. Expanding on this, we secondly advocate that thinking through emotions in the field helps us to see how the ubiquitous and everyday smartphone can be attached with specific emotions. These emotional attachments might be "dependent on past histories of association that often 'work' through concealment" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 13). That is, they are not necessarily made by the persons in the field, but work through an iterative concealment. We found that smartphone cameras are sticky with distrust when their application is not self-evidently personal (e.g. for selfies) or even obviously used to collect data. This raises the question of how to address participants' feelings when they collect data on behalf of absent researchers. Here, we draw on the responsible gaze we witnessed among research participants. We understand this reaction as an effect of emotional discomfort when pointing the camera at people and holding power to disseminate whatever content it records. We argue that acknowledging the "sociality of emotions" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8) in the field is useful for us, as absent researchers, in situating the findings within complex sets of social relations. Finally, the need to pay attention to one's own emotions in research is an established argument (e.g. Bondi, 2005; Fitzpatrick & Longley, 2014; Schurr & Abdo, 2016). When we are physically absent yet conducting research through a mobile app, making sense of the association between objects and emotions

provides us with a better understanding of the ethics in research encounters. However, as Ahmed (2004) reminds us, emotions can also become unstuck, reattach in a new and more adhesive form, or only stick within specific spaces of encounters. Therefore, we do not propose a fixed ethical guideline when working with smartphones in the field. We do not argue that smartphones are objects of discomfort in the field per se. Rather, we suggest a continuous discussion of the moving ethical relationships in the field which need continuous scrutiny of the emotions circulating and sticking to humans and nonhumans.

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