

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FLOW OF EMOTION IN ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH

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### Abstract

In this article I provide a reflexive account of my emotions both prior to and during fieldwork. I begin with a personal narrative that explores my motivations for conducting a study on a pertinent environmental issue – river pollution. My comparative ethnographic fieldwork in two different socio-cultural and environmental settings, that of the Klang River in Kuala Lumpur and the Torrens River in Adelaide, yielded stories, pictures, and/or a spectrum of emotions about people's interactions with the rivers, some of which resonated with my own. On the one hand, positive emotions during fieldwork were triggered, for example, when I observed colourful flora and fauna in certain section of the rivers. On the other hand, I experienced negative feelings when I observed floating rubbish and trash racks installed across the rivers. I describe these personal fieldwork experiences, alongside a discussion about my own reflections. Finally, and in light of my fieldwork experience, I briefly suggest implications for ethnographic research and methodological practice.

I do not think that effective ethnographic research can be done without emotional engagement, and the pursuit of a methodology that ignores what we learn from our emotions is undermining the validity of the resulting information .... In fieldwork as in all of life, sensation, emotion, and intellect operate simultaneously to structure and interpret our experience of the world (Gearing 1995, p. 209) .

The above quote suggests the significance of emotions in ethnographic research. Much of the writing about reflections of the 'ethnographic self' (Coffey 1999) and emotion are discussed by way of a researcher's emotional engagements with their participants, for example, with participants who are experiencing a terminal illness (see Rager 2005), bereavement (see Rosaldo 2007), or stressful life events (see Owens 1996). Similarly, in many ways the narratives and practices of my participants in relation to the subject matter of my study roused my own emotions. This article<sup>1</sup> takes a different turn, however, as I examine my own emotional reactions to my research setting, that of two river systems in very different socio-cultural settings. The sites I explore simultaneously serve as a background to my research about human relationships to the consequences and flows of polluted waters. In particular, I consider how a river as an environmental place and space in and of itself can evoke deep emotional responses that, in turn, can enrich fieldwork experiences and ethnographic research. First, I provide a contextual background of my PhD topic and research settings. I then turn to an exploration of my motivations to conduct research on human-water interactions. Thirdly, I discuss my various feelings during fieldwork. Embedded in the discussion is how the environmental setting enabled me to understand the complexities of my participants' relationships with local rivers. I conclude with a brief post-fieldwork insight into concepts of place in ethnographic research methods and emphases.

### Contextual background

Initially, my PhD research was aimed at unpacking the meanings of pollution by comparing people's responses to two urban rivers – the Klang River in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and the Torrens River in Adelaide, South Australia. I conducted seven months of fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur and eight months in Adelaide, employing participant observation and in-depth open-ended interviews. Almost all of my participants lived in the catchments that included local communities in close proximity to the rivers. Government officials, environmental activists and academics were also included. My participant-observation activities included walking

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along the river systems and observing how local women and men made use of the river, as well as the way in which various types of pollutant discharged into the river, and cleaning-up operations. I also participated in various environmental workshops and seminars, and river restoration activities. Upon completion of my data collection, interview transcription, and now being at the writing stage, I gradually came to realize meanings embedded in the river-data, as well as how the ethnographic vignettes I had so carefully stored started to evolve into coherent socio-cultural insights. I began to see how reliance on concepts of place could help me to interpret my data. I became especially concerned to describe and analyze the interactions people had with the rivers, and how and to what extent dirt and pollution affected people's attachment to river-inspired environmental places.

### **The tale of two rivers**

The Klang River catchment is located on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, encompassing two states. The river originates in the state of Selangor and then flows through the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur before re-entering Selangor. The 120-km-long Klang River begins at the Main Range in the upper basin; it then meanders in a south-westerly direction, passing through Kuala Lumpur city centre, and finally discharges into the Straits of Malacca. It is the most densely populated region in Malaysia with its heavy concentration of industries and population. The Torrens River, on the other hand, originates in Mount Lofty Ranges, 55 km north-east of Adelaide, Australia. It flows 85 km from its headwater through a few small towns in the upper reaches, and meanders through Adelaide city centre before it drains into Gulf of St. Vincent at Henley Beach. The Klang and the Torrens rivers drain a total area of 1278 km<sup>2</sup> and 620 km<sup>2</sup> respectively. Historically, both rivers were significant as one of the reasons for the siting and development of the Kuala Lumpur and Adelaide into capital cities of Malaysia and South Australia. Like many other rivers around the world, the Klang and the Torrens and their catchment areas have been highly modified to meet human needs such dam construction, transportation, flood mitigation control, and other land use practices. Such rampant land use practices combined with population growth put a strain on the catchments' eco-system, thus contribute to the declining river health. In this regards, both rivers have been identified as polluted rivers reported in the local official documents as well as popular media.

## **Water places, motivation and emotions**

A number of tensions continue to exist about the relationship between 'nature' and 'culture'. In more recent times, discussion has turned to how these influence (and are influenced by) emotions. I draw in this article on a common definition of emotions from psychology whereby emotions are described as a combination of three components involving '(1) physiological arousal, (2) expressive behaviour, and (3) conscious experience, including thoughts and feelings' (Myers 2007, p. 513), such as happiness, anger and surprise. It should be noted that the three components are not necessarily expressed similarly for each emotion. For instance, certain emotions, such as regret or gratitude, may not necessarily demonstrate any behaviour or bodily change (Gergen et al. 1989).

Reflecting on my fieldwork, I observed the different emotions that have occurred for me over the years, including as a young woman in Malaysia. These greatly influenced the choice of my research topic. My interest in the natural environment began during my childhood years when I lived in a housing area (a military camp as my father was an army) that was surrounded by nature: tropical bush, streams, and beaches were my common playgrounds. I vividly remember my own good feelings as I enjoyed the gifts of nature: the freshness of air, the smell of leaves, the warm, nurturing temperature, the cold water of a stream, and the sound of beach waves. One of my favourite places was a small stream located less than a kilometer at the back of my house. The water was crystal clear. I could see my feet firmly submerged in the riverbed and colorful fishes swam gracefully in the river water. As I grew up I continued to remain connected to my neighborhood and occasionally dreamt of its natural environment, the stream and beaches.

In recent years, two emotionally charged events influenced my choice of research topic. The first happened in my work place at the International Islamic University, Malaysia when I was teaching a Sociology course that included a chapter on 'Environment and Society'. I began the class by taking my students to the bank of the Pusu River that flows through the University campus (the Pusu River is a tributary of the Gombak River which eventually feeds into the Klang River). I delivered the lecture there with a view of capturing the interests of my students, as well as instilling awareness about the importance of environmental protection. The outing to the riverbank had tremendous impact on some of my students. This was, evident a few weeks later, when, to

my horror, I saw hundreds of dead, floating fish through a wide glass window of my office that happened to overlook the Pusu River, and several of my students visited my office to express their concerns. I was very touched by their concern, especially as it was so depressing to see the dead, floating fish in various stretches of the river for days after the incident. These images, combined with the concern of my students, strengthened my desire to actively protect our river systems.

The second event occurred in December 2004 when the world was shocked by a great force of nature: the Tsunami's wave that killed almost 300,000 people throughout Asia. I volunteered to be part of the Tsunami Support Relief Team focused on rendering psychological and emotional support to the victims. We went to the affected area at Kota Kuala Muda (a small fishing village located at the mouth of Muda River, Kedah) where I witnessed the impact of the force of nature on the destruction of human life and people's possessions. A great sense of fear, sadness, shock, and terror among the victims was obvious, especially through their facial expressions and trembling voices as they narrated their 'massive black waves' stories. Some of the victims reported having recurring nightmares about the wave and the tragedy. Listening to their stories and observing their very distinct behavioural reactions evoked mixed feelings of fear, sadness, and terror for me. I stepped into demolished houses and spotted the black muddy floors and walls, my body shivered as I tried to visualize the waves rising high and crashing hard on housing structures and occupants, living plants, and humans' possessions alike, demolishing them into the devastating forms evidenced. The calmness of the sea, the slow breeze of the wind at the time of my visit certainly helped to diminish the ferocity of the seawater when the incident happened. Taken together, the sweetness of my childhood memories, the images of dead fish, and the fear look of the Tsunami victims affected me emotionally and galvanized my interest to study one of the most powerful natural elements known to humankind – water.

### **Emotions during Fieldwork**

Gathering data as a core activity in the PhD process involved a great deal of time and energy. A whirl of conflicting emotions marked the whole process of my fieldwork journey. This myriad of emotions, including positive feelings (such as joy, energy, motivation), and the negative ones (anger, disguise, helplessness, and guilt) were experienced as I walked, sailed, and drove along

different stretches of both rivers; and as I listened to the narratives of my participants and observed their behaviours and activities. Both my participants' and my own emotional experiences reinforced each other, often providing for me rich sources of reflective insights to start building an ethnographic account of human-water interactions. An influential work by anthropologist Kay Milton (2002) on emotions and environmental protection helped me to understand my own emotional responses, as well as those of the people among whom I worked.

Positive feelings such as joy and energy obviously refreshed me during fieldwork. These emotions were experienced generally in areas of the rivers I studied that were considered 'clean', and therefore not 'polluted'. I borrow the notion of a 'clean river' here from many of my participants who used it to refer to when the water was crystal clear and no rubbish was visible. On these occasions, my body muscles felt relaxed and my spirit was uplifted as my feet touched the crystal-clear-cold water in the upstream of the Klang River where the water remains in a pristine condition. Similarly, I felt a sense of serenity and accomplishment as I walked along the Torrens through its 35-km Linear Park (a multi-function park servicing as a flood mitigation control, recreation and transportation corridor was constructed along both sides of the riverbanks linking the foothills with the coast). Feeling a strong sense of environmental place with my body and heart, as well as my brain, helped me to comprehend the heartfelt connection people regularly sustain towards their rivers. For instance, one of my Adelaide participants has walked along the Torrens River Linear Park religiously for the past 45 years. He revealed his emotional connections and sense of wonder with the river in the following way: 'If you can hear water running, it gives you a really deep sense of hope, sense of serenity, and [sense] of life .... For me, that's one of the beauties of the Torrens – is just to be able to walk along the running water, to sit down right by the water, and to hear water running' (Interview. Adelaide, 2008).

Walking along or near a river where a certain intimacy is experienced is also something many people reported, as well as describing a feeling that resonated with me. When I had no interview appointments, for instance, I walked along and sat down by the rivers during the day. As I walked and traced the meandering of both rivers, my senses were stimulated by different shades of colour of the flora and fauna, the smell of fresh air and the sound of flowing water. I marveled at God's creation of different colours of waterbirds along the Torrens. I was excited and surprised to see purple swamp hens in some stretches of

the Torrens as my favourite colour is purple. It was an equally defining experience to observe long-legged waterscrappers and dragonflies skim about on the water surface at the upstream of the Klang River.

Obviously working with the subject matter of pollution, I was focused on a topic that attracts negative connotations, a quality that impacted my emotions during daily execution of my fieldwork. There were moments of deeply negative feelings such as frustration, sadness and helplessness about the state of these 'wounded rivers' – to borrow Brian Wattchow's (2008) evocative phrase. I felt disgusted and angry when I saw hundreds of bottled water, styrofoam food containers, tin cans, plastic bags and other visible rubbish floating in the rivers. My list of items polluting the Klang River reveals that plastic bottled water containers topped the list. Indeed it is an irony that as people buy bottled water for a higher potable water quality, that the containers, in turn, are thrown into the river thereby polluting it. Observing trash racks – a device installed by city councils across both rivers to trap the visible rubbish, were equally upsetting experiences. In these cases, images of a healthy river are threatened when material objects intermingle with nature. Rivers should have rocks, pebbles, and sands instead of trash racks and rubbish. The rubbish and trash racks, to quote anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966), are really 'a matter out of place' (p. 35).

Apart from visible pollutants, there is also the threat of invisible pollutants that pose significant health risks to the public. For example, the impact of invisible pollutants coming from agricultural pesticides and urban runoff led to the outbreaks of the blue-green algae in both rivers. Blue-green algae outbreaks refer to an explosive and sudden growth of this aquatic plant, induced by high temperatures, large amounts of chemicals, and untreated stagnant water. The water quality of the Torrens was seriously affected by the highly toxic blue-green algae. Subsequently, the Torrens Lake (the river has been dredged to create an ornamental lake) was closed for up to eight weeks during summer for the past seven years consecutively (see Figure 1). While the safety of the public was ensured as the paddle boating and rowing were banned during the closure, it was heartening to see wildlife such as pacific black ducks struggling for survival as they skimmed through the slimy blue-green algae bloom.



**Figure 1.** The closing of the Torrens Lake during summer 2008 due to the water quality problem of blue-green algae bloom. Photograph by Nor Azlin.

A significant portion of my ethnographic fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur was conducted at Kampung Datuk Keramat – a residential area located approximately ten kilometers downstream from the source and three kilometers from Kuala Lumpur’s city centre. There were two reasons why this section of the river was selected as the main research setting. Firstly, there are two trash racks installed in that section of the river. I observed types of rubbish trapped at the trash traps as well as trash racks-cleaning operations conducted by the city council. Secondly, Kampung Datuk Keramat marked the beginning of physical transformation of the Klang River from a ‘natural’ into a concrete river. Specifically, the river has been transformed into a transportation corridor. As if the river and its bank offering a space, a modern public transportation system – an elevated highway and a Light Railway Transit (LRT) line - was constructed along and above it (see Figure 2). The riverbanks were concreted about ten metres wide and two meters thick on each side. Cylindrical concrete columns (about two meters in diameter and ten meters in height) were erected approximately five meters apart from each other to support the highway. Subsequently, a meandering river has disappeared. An aerial view would reveal that the Klang River in

this section now looks like a water highway. Indeed, the Klang was transformed from a natural river entity into a ‘humanature’s’ river – a term used by an art photographer Peter Goin (1997) to describe the process of modifications of the Kissimmee River into a canal for flood control, and then later, turning the canal back into a ‘natural’ river under its intensive restoration program. The trash racks (both as a technical and cultural response to pollution), and the transformation of the Klang from a natural into a cultural riverscape, made Kampung Datuk Keramat an interesting ethnographic setting.



**Figure 2.** The construction of a highway and light railway transforming the Klang River in kampung Datuk Keramat as a longkang besar. Photograph by Nor Azlin.

I was unprepared for the contradictory feelings that permeated my research at Kampung Datuk Keramat. As I walked along the river, I felt so insignificant and helpless under the towering concrete columns. In my view, the river has been ‘caged’ and ‘straightened’, as if it has been punished for a crime it did not commit. I felt the need to give ‘voice’ to the river. I was deeply ‘responsive’ to the concrete riverscape as well. I sometimes found myself reluctant to start my day, as opposed to the energetic feelings I experienced during my visits to the upper section of the Klang River that is in a much healthier condition. Contrary to

the positive emotions discussed earlier, my body muscles tensed when I walked along the straightened river as I felt trapped and alienated in the concrete riverscape. Unsurprisingly, many of my participants referred to this poor river as a *longkang besar*, the Malay word for 'a big drain'. In fact a few participants uttered the word *longkang besar* with a cynical and demeaning voice tone. While I was upset with such negative labeling and voice tone, my own 'ethnographic presence' by walking under the massive concrete structure of the Klang's embankment allowed me to comprehend, and share resonance with, such animosity.

By contrast, prior to my ethnographic research, I was happy and relieved whenever I was above the river, especially when I travelled by train, something I have done like millions of passengers for almost a decade. I felt relieved as the train helped me to travel to the city centre faster and without having to go through the hassle of traffic congestion. However, my fieldwork induced feelings of guilt. As the train moved and I looked downward to the river, I felt guilty because I have benefited from the construction of the railway at the expense of the poor river. Seven months of walking experiences under the massive engineering structure evoked an interplay of guilt and relief. Indeed, being on the same place – exactly on the same coordinates, but at different gradients - helped me to conceptually as well as emotionally frame many aspects of my research.

## Conclusions

Emotional engagement with water places, and how this engagement significantly influences the direction and depth of ethnographic inquiry, sits at the heart of this article. As I have shown, river places yielded a considerable array of emotional consequences: from elation to despair and despondency, especially with regard to the declining health of river systems, and human manipulation of a river system's ecology and sociality. Both positive and negative feelings guided what I paid attention to, and how I interpreted the significance of my participants' perceptions and emotions. These obviously intertwined with my own observations, emotions and experience in regard to explanations of river-places and pollution.

Fifteen-months of riverscape experience also led to a 'prolonged fieldwork effect'. I have reflectively noticed that I am now more sensitive to the mix of environmental messages that around me. For instance, I was very much overwhelmed to the extent of openly crying when I watched two documentaries,

Blowpipes and Bulldozers: The Story of the Penan Tribe and Bruno Manser (1988) and Drowned Out (2002) (focused on resistance to the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in western India), both of which were shown in my 'Environmental Issues in Asia' class. In addition, I now avoid buying bottled water, an outcome of observing thousands of them floating in the rivers.

My fieldwork experience indicates one of the hallmarks of ethnographic research – the presence of the 'ethnographic self' and the impact of long-term engagement in a particular research setting. Implicitly, my fieldwork also indicates the potential of place as a central concept rather than merely as a backdrop in anthropological research. As anthropologist Margaret Rodman (2003) has argued, 'The physical, emotional, and experiential realities place holds for their inhabitants at particular times need to be understood apart from their creation as the locales of ethnography' (p. 205). More substantive work on the interrelated role of place and emotions in anthropology and the social sciences more generally is clearly needed, perhaps with a view to contributing to the solving of the pressing and complex problem of environmental degradation.

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