



# THE AFFECTIVE RESEARCHER

Edited by Andrew G. Gibson



**GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

# THE AFFECTIVE RESEARCHER

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EDITED BY

**ANDREW G. GIBSON**

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80262-336-9 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-333-8 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-335-2 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*Dedicated to Kit O'Flatherty (Mamó) and Marie Moroney.*

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Andrew G. Gibson

I would like to most sincerely thank Emily, Quivine, Sarah and Samantha for sticking with this project through circumstances we could never have foreseen. Knowing as I do the difficulties and hardship you all endured while developing and writing your chapters, I am deeply appreciative of the commitment and care you have put into realizing this book. It was only by editing this book that I came to understand what a pleasure and a privilege it is to engage a group of thoughtful and empathetic scholars on the voyage of exploration which we undertook together. Thank you to Marian Mahat, with whom I had some of the first conversations about finding a home for this project, and also for connecting me with Sarah and Samantha. Thank you also to all in Emerald Publishing, especially Kimberley Chadwick and Sashikala Balasubramanian, for their support and understanding, as well as patiently keeping me on track. Thank you to Deirdre Troy for the conversation that was the catalyst for my change of topic that put me on an affective path. Finally, thank you to my husband Sen for his love, support and encouragement throughout this entire experience. Especially so as I moved to Denmark for work midway through working on this book – and I promise I'll walk Alpha and Beta more when I'm home!

Emer Emily Neenan

Thanks to Andrew Gibson for the chat in on Nassau St, the reminder texts, the feedback and the patient belief. Many thanks to Joseph Roche and Colette Murphy for supporting my stubbornly orthogonal approach to thesis writing. Thanks to Laura Bell and Kathryn Lambe, my on-call proofreaders who also have their own jobs to do but never complain. A fond mention, as always, for Áine O'Neill, Frank Neenan, Barry Neenan, Stuart Gorman and Kai Ellis.

Quivine Ndomo

I would like to applaud the kindness, willingness and patience of all my research participants to share their intimate and often tough life stories and experiences with me repeatedly since the beginning of my academic research endeavours in 2016.

Sarah Healy

I research, teach, learn and create on the lands of the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri people who are the traditional owners. They have been the custodians of these lands, skies and waterways for thousands and thousands of years. I offer my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that Aboriginal sovereignty has not been ceded. I also thank the wonderful students and colleagues that I research, teach, learn and create with at the University of Melbourne. You make artistry, researching and teaching a joy.

# AN INTRODUCTION – CHOOSING A TOPIC AND BECOMING AN AFFECTIVE RESEARCHER

**Andrew G. Gibson**

## ABSTRACT

*A piece of frequently given informal advice to those starting in the world of research is to ‘pick a topic you’ll be able to stick with for three or four years’ – and often that’s the end of it. This chapter suggests that we should understand the importance of confronting the ‘affective gap’ in how research is currently conceived. It does so by considering how usually we do not engage with the issues underlying this ‘sticking with’ and what allows us to sustain our attention and effort across the years of a research project. Through a case study of my own confrontation with the question of how I chose and changed my own PhD research topic, this chapter introduces the idea of affective research through an exploration of the concept of affect and its relevance to research. The first part of this chapter explores affect*

*through a brief overview of four different scholarly literatures, to provide an initial framework and some clarity for what is often an opaque subject. This is then grounded through an affective engagement with the issue of choosing a research topic and how this affects our research. It concludes with a brief overview of the other chapters in the volume.*

**Keywords:** Research methods; doctoral pedagogy; research topic; affect; epistemicide; sociology of absences

## A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

This chapter has the job of setting out the terms of this volume as a whole, which is to introduce the concept of affect. This is the idea that ‘thinking has feelings’ (Long Chu, 2021) and that feeling has a relationship thought. In this introduction, I am arguing for the significance of affect to those of us who do academic research. This is also an attempt to make form and content rhyme, and so to write an affective introduction, in the various senses of the word. As the author of the first chapter of the book, I set the scene for those to follow, but I aim to do so in line with affect as a concept. It is, then, less concerned with policing boundaries between what reads as standard ‘academic’ writing and what is personal or biographical. It takes the form of an overview of how I came to see the importance of affect in research and what literatures I relate this to – but I make no claims to being authoritative. The idea for this edited volume has been of interest to me since the mid-point of my PhD research, and it was specifically

through my own reflection, as well as discussion with friends, that I came to appreciate the significance of being an affective researcher. Before getting down to those specifics, however, it could be of benefit to look to why a book on affect and research might be needed at all.

In general introductions to the world of research, and more specifically guides to the PhD, there is an emphasis on ‘getting things done’. There are timeline management tools, mapping exercises, project templates and Gantt charts, with an emphasis on – upon reflection what are worryingly named – deadlines. These break up research into divisible segments, to ease the novice researcher into the world of being responsible for a multi-year undertaking. These are all valuable in their way, and serve their purpose in making the individual research into a project manager, thus making – it is hoped – projects manageable. This is not, however, the last word of what it is to do research. It is but one perspective, and one danger with this emphasis on effectiveness is that it reinforces the view that ‘one is supposed to be a self-reliant unit of human capital’ (Wark, 2017, p. 192) – foreclosing any possibility of a transformative perspective on academic work.

These approaches are in many respects those of ‘highly effective researchers’ who have book contracts, and often tenure, and so they emphasize what it takes to get things done. They write, perhaps unwittingly, in order to reproduce themselves in subsequent generations of researchers. I would not argue against this view, to say we should be ineffective or inefficient, but I will say we should not assume this is the full story, nor the only way to do research. This perspective is most often that of the supervisor, introducing the novice researcher to what can be a confusing new world, seeking to simplify things. Written as they are by those who supervise research, it must also be noted, means that the positionality of such texts can forget the experience of what it is to come to

research for the first time. The affect of research is qualitatively different for the experienced researcher as compared to one entering this world for the first time. But by their nature, such general introductions are didactic, and flattening, and dialogue is hard to capture in the written word. It similarly is difficult to represent the different affective chronologies involved – writing *about* the formation of the developing researcher is very different from writing *as* a developing researcher.

Much is kept hidden in research, and there is a significant affective component – if not indeed cost – to this. Aspects of affect hover on the edges of discussing research via long-standing questions of reflexivity, and more recent discussions of the experience of precarity. There are challenges that emerge at what is increasingly recognized as the porous border between objectivity and subjectivity. Affect in this light is closer to a risk that must be managed, however, and when a fuller conception of self is introduced in the methodology section of a paper or thesis, it is then to be contained with a statement that amounts to ‘but don’t worry, I didn’t let that interfere with this work’. I approach affect in order to formulate an alternative perspective, one that tries to include what goes unsaid, unwritten and consequently unread in undertaking research. To take an affirmative stance, Melanie Stefan’s idea of ‘A CV of failures’ (2010) was one prompt that helped me to see how one-sided our presentation of self in everyday life as a researcher often is.

*As scientists, we construct a narrative of success that renders our setbacks invisible both to ourselves and to others. Often, other scientists’ careers seem to be a constant, streamlined series of triumphs. Therefore, whenever we experience an individual failure, we feel alone and dejected.*

This is part of what has been described as the rhetoric of effortlessness in science (McAllister, 2016). Iman Mersal's poem 'CV' also poignantly evokes this, describing 'A life overstuffed with accomplishments,/scrubbed free of dirt'. What I see as the worthwhile challenge here is to bring more of the experience of research to light, and in a book like this with a number of us working towards this common goal, we reduce the perception of isolation. More than this, however, we have collectively set ourselves the challenge of a project that is affirmative (Braidotti, 2019, pp. 3–4, 61ff). As such, for us the goal is to conceptualize affect not as something often concealed brought to light and risk-managed, but rather to recognize affect as fruitful in doing research and being a researcher.<sup>1</sup> This is not without its own dangers, however. Affect is tied up with vulnerability, as it is also social, and to paraphrase Spinoza, implies the possibility of *affecting* and being *affected by* others. It may also run 'the risk of not being taken seriously', as Halberstam puts it, but especially given the last few years, perhaps we can agree that '[t]his is not a bad time to experiment with disciplinary transformation on behalf of the project of generating new forms of knowing' (2011, pp. 6–7).

## ORIGINS AND EPISTEMOLOGIES OF AFFECT

This chapter takes pragmatic approach to affect, understanding that it 'holds a glut of meanings in generative drift: from emotion, feeling, mood, sensation, and vibe to action, atmosphere, capacity, force, intensity, potential, or relation' (Arthur, 2021). Here I will not present a detailed analysis or genealogy, but nevertheless it is useful to present a lay of the conceptual land – the bare minimum but suggestive mapping necessary to make sense of what follows. For the question of where to begin, we are spoilt for choice. We could look to

origins in terms of how affect is a specific conceptual development in the realm of ‘theory’ and feminist research methods. Another route could be to look to developments in the study of knowledge and science, and how we construct knowledge and the implications for notions of objectivity and the researcher. We might also consider where to situate affect in time; does it derive from discussions in theory in the 1990s, or further back in debates at the very foundation of modern Western philosophy in the seventeenth century? Affect might also be situated geographically, in terms of Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s (2012, 2018) epistemologies of the Global South contrasted with epistemologies of the Global North.

Choosing between any one of these would narrow our focus unnecessarily, closing off opportunities to clarify our understanding and learn from alternative conceptualizations. So, by engaging with these discourses it is useful to understand ‘affect’ as referring to a variety of parallel and criss-crossing concerns, tributaries of a greater watershed. By going higher up or further back into different channels and streams, we might better see the connections between apparently disparate discourses. This also sidesteps probably irresolvable debates about origins; ‘after all, there is no pure or somehow originary state for affect’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2007, p. 1). As such, various approaches will be addressed in turn, in no particular order, and in very abridged form. These four approaches can be understood under the approximate headings of theory, philosophy, science and geography.

### Affect Theory

A fair place to start with this constellation of ideas is with what is termed affect theory in sociology, women’s studies and cultural studies (Clough & Halley, 2007; see also; Gregg &

Seigworth, 2010). In the theory of affect, 1995 was a signal year, as it saw the publication from within ‘theory’ of Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s introduction to psychologist Silvan Tomkins’s writings on affect, and also Brian Massumi’s article ‘The Autonomy of Affect’, a central paper in initiating the contemporary study of affect within philosophy. From both directions, research from neuroscience was used in an interdisciplinary way to initiate alternative approaches to how we discuss understanding. This has resulted in what is by now a highly developed academic literature of what has come to be described as an – if not *the* – ‘affective turn’ (Arthur, 2021; Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). While a selective engagement and quotation from those setting out to define affect is as likely to misrepresent as to do justice, and there is no space here to adjudicate between debates, a summary of just what this body of scholarship does would be useful.<sup>2</sup>

Papoulias and Callard address the question of why humanities and social science scholars shifted focus to affect from the 1990s, and see the answer as relating to a recalibration of the relationship between ‘theory’ and science. Referencing Sedgwick and Frank’s (1995) paper, they regard theory – literary, cultural, social, ‘High’ – prior to affect’s arrival defined according to structuralist assumptions and relying on linguistic analysis. This was the foundation on which understanding of human communication then took place, they assert. Ruth Leys’s influential paper supports this reading, suggesting that the newfound attention given to emotions and affect could then be understood as

*...a widespread reaction against what has come to be seen as the straitjacket imposed by the poststructuralist emphasis on language and psychoanalysis, a reaction also motivated by the view*

*that the body in its lived materiality has been neglected in the humanities and social sciences.*

(2011, pp. 440–441)

Affect, in contrast however, promised a

*...fluid materiality [...] capable of disturbing the role of foundations in general [...] disturbing familiar hierarchies (most obviously that in which the ‘mind’ is positioned as the executive director of the body).*

(Papoulias & Callard, 2010, p. 35)

A difficulty appears for me, however, in that affect in this literature is well understood by its contributors, and the debates have attained a high degree of sophistication. Affect takes the form of, to borrow from discussion of another area, ‘a metatheoretical scheme for the conceptual structuring of an area of study’ (Joas, 1993, p. 225). As such affect is assumed rather than defined, so that asking the question ‘what is affect?’ appears – and *feels* – gauche.

This relates to debates within affect theory, however, and it’s worth noting that there is even here professional and personal investment in just what kinds of affects are worth talking about, and how. In speaking of what Sianne Ngai has termed ‘ugly feelings’, Andrea Long Chu writes:

*These are affects to which many radical academics are still loath to extend precious intellectual credit, the kind of thing upon which one comments with gentle, practiced dubiety, I’m not sure that this represents your best work. Students aren’t just feeling bad, in other words; they’re also doing feeling badly.*

(2017, p. 302)

I am not a scholar of affect. So, I am content to start with an understanding of affect as being ‘somewhere between