



# On the 'Vulnerability' of the Social Researcher:

## Observations from the Field of Spirit Interference

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Anthropology is about embarking...on a voyage through a long tunnel... Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice – the insight that is always arriving late – as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way.

Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996: 2-3)

We have approached possession as though it existed in a museum and did not have any real power to subject us to its meanings, masking our desire to watch and record while constructing ourselves as impervious to the "belief structures" that make possession possible for our others.

Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, (2002: 19)

### Introduction

In his *Grief and a Headhunter's Rage* (1989), Renato Rosaldo writes that he only came to appreciate the meaning of the rage that emerged from grief, loss, and bereavement, which characterised Ilongot headhunting in the Philippines, after the sudden demise of his spouse and anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo while both of them were in the field. In this candid, yet intellectually stimulating account that recognises the cultural force of emotions in fieldwork, Rosaldo 'return(s) to anthropology on an occasion when no return seemed remotely possible' (Behar, 1996:167) and movingly pushes forth the claim that there is a need to incorporate the position and affective experiences of ethnographers in their call towards meaningful interpretation and writing that is able to elicit in part emotional understanding and resonance.

My intellectual interest in studying spirit interference was similarly borne out of my own memories and experiences with the metaphysical as I was grow-

ing up in Singapore. My maternal great-grandmother from Indonesia, valiant yet unassuming as I knew her to be, passed away from what was perceived to be a spirit incursion. I was barely six years old then. Petrified and confused by the spate of events that followed, I attempted to banish the fear, emotional experiences, and memories away. While this was successful as the years of exile passed by, her image and the inexplicable circumstances of her demise lingered in the recesses of my mind. I never fully understood the reasons for this fear and suppression, until I chanced upon the powerful works of Ruth Behar and Renato Rosaldo, which inexplicably resurrected my memories of my great-grandmother to the day when she died. These 'critical moments' gradually propelled my intellectual curiosity to study this phenomenon further, but at the same time, I attempted to brace myself for the emotional experiences that needed to be revisited.

In many respects, the field of spirit interference –

both in and out of it – is pregnant with numerous emotional accounts of these uncertain, gauche moments, and uncanny encounters that I experienced as an ethnographer myself: misunderstandings, altercations, pain, sorrow, feelings of discomfort and fear, depression, uncertainty, and vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> As I engaged with others in these settings, I often found myself lodged into these frequently unsettling moments, where support and/or opposition from these diverse social actors I encountered in the field were continuously challenged and complicated by the ambiguities and affective struggles experienced by both themselves and their respondents during crises of spirit incursions. While there has indeed been greater and increased emphasis assigned to the personal and experiential components of social research (Armstrong, 1992; Brewer, 2001; Davies, 2008; Dumont, 1992 [1978]; Flick, et al., 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Nilan, 2002; Sampson & Thomas, 2003; Van Maanen, 1982; Yamagishi, 2005)<sup>2</sup>, particularly from feminist ethnographies that have facilitated access into understanding reflexive modes of knowledge (Behar, 1996; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Golde, 1986; Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Wolf, 1996), most researchers in the study of the occult and spirit interference have surprisingly not taken a more explicitly reflexive, candid, and ‘emotionally-aware’ methodological approach in presenting their research findings and musings, though with some important exceptions (see, for instance, Blanes, 2006; Castaneda, 1968, 1971, 1973; Goldman, 2001; Lee, 1987; Zablocki, 2001). Lee (1987) further observes that many anthropologists and sociologists, with some exceptions (Grindal, 1983; Harner, 1980; Willis, 1999), reject personal accounts of the paranormal because they ostensibly fail to reach the standards of scientific validity and credibility grounding social science research. There is, however, much to consider here, given that the experiences in the conduct of ethnographic fieldwork in these settings comprise a complex and multifaceted intersection of risk, emotions, vulnerability, and other personal demands on researchers and the ‘others’ they are studying ethnographically.<sup>3</sup> Harding (1987:9) expresses this eloquently when she contended that ‘(t)he beliefs and

behaviours of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research ... [given that] the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests’. In this vein, all social researchers are, to some degree, connected to, or part of, the ‘object’ of their research.

This paper discusses and problematises the relatively neglected issue of danger, risk, and vulnerability in fieldwork, with particular emphasis on the emotional and spiritual tribulations researchers of spirit interference potentially experience.<sup>4</sup> It begins with a brief review on the gradually growing corpus of literature on methods with reference to this issue, and a discussion of some of the pertinent shortcomings in their conceptualisation of ‘risk’ and ‘danger’, with particular emphasis on emotional and spiritual dangers. The second part of the paper illustrates some of the manifestations of these dangers by presenting a case study based on my fieldwork experiences researching spirit interference in Singapore and Malaysia. The study of the supernatural and ‘deviant’ aspects of popular religion is often laden with fear and vulnerable moments that researchers need to confront when in the field, but rarely address and articulate. In this respect, I was confronted in the field with an arsenal of personal and professional quandaries: How do I competently negotiate and manage the emotional tensions, conflict, and fears that surface in the course of fieldwork, and its effects on both my professional and private lives? Could it also possibly be that, as Kenyon and Hawker (1999) have reported, the issue of personal ‘safety’ has been given little attention in the methodological literature because it is postured as a ‘non-problem’? Was the apprehension and trepidation experienced by researchers like me when confronted with certain inexplicable, uncanny events and phenomena unfounded and thus rendered ‘irrational’? More pertinently, how do these research processes and reflections affect the manner in which my data get collected? Guided by these queries, I demonstrate that the heavily-invested emotions of researchers and its effects on her/his social relations *both* within and beyond the field need to be reconsidered and managed,

given that ethnographic fieldwork is satiated with relations that are not necessarily always documented and referenced in ethnographies (Grindal & Salamone, 2006; Handler, 2004). In this manner, social researchers are entwined in meaningful and often emotionally intense relationships that often permeate the parameters beyond their field research. Those who do embrace researchers into their social worlds – respondents, friends, and/or families – do so personally, affectingly, and emotionally, which in turn involve reciprocal loyalties, duties, and obligations, both for them and researchers alike. Traipsed between what Keane terms 'an epistemology of intimacy and estrangement'<sup>5</sup> (2005:62), the risk of not critically engaging with or reflecting on these issues could potentially compromise not only the quality of data collection and interpretation, but also expose researchers to further risk, danger, and vulnerability, particularly when dealing with the field of the metaphorical. In this regard, I re-conceptualise and extend the notion of 'danger' in this paper to include very importantly both emotional and spiritual domains. The critical-reflexive exploration of these quandaries – borne of multiple and evolving positions, and their consequent allegiances – ultimately enriched my understanding and interpretation of the field of spirit interference further and thus reflected the emotional and intellectual complexities of engaging intimately with respondents in the field. The final part of the paper raises concerns and quandaries that surfaced during the course of the research I had conducted, and proposes certain initiatives and suggestions to tackle the issues embedded in research that entails such elements of fear and danger.

### Uncanny Encounters and Other 'Danger' Zones

The reflexive and emotional bearing of undertaking ethnographic research in the phenomenon of spirit incursions is potentially a crucial source of insight. In fact, the emotional discomfort of witnessing conflicts, violence, illness, or even death as a result of spirit affliction needs to be understood in terms of the ethnographer's own involvement in the actions of others, as

well as the concomitant risks s/he experienced in the field.<sup>6</sup> Here, it is crucial to understand that as qualitative researchers, we should recognise that, following scholars such as Sandelowski (2002) and Low (2005, 2009), participant observation is also an emotionally embodied and sensuous encounter.<sup>7</sup> While risk and danger are known to have been experienced by social researchers, these are hardly recorded in the earlier literature or openly discussed, with the exception of Nash (1963), Wintrob (1969), and several other fleeting anecdotal writings. Apparently, a number of social researchers then, such as anthropologists, were very sensitive about these experiences, preferring to keep their data well hidden from the scrutiny of colleagues and students (see, for instance, Wax [1960], in Wintrob [1969]), though this was still in the minority. Lee further points out that such data exists in the field notes of these researchers: 'Little of it is formalised ... and most of it is exchanged through the confessional accounts, corridor talks, and war stories that animate a given research community' (1995: vii).<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, even in both early and recent scholarly works, 'danger' towards social researchers, when it is actually addressed, has been mostly framed as immediate physical threat to personal safety (see also Gwiasda, et al., 1997; Williams, et al., 1992). While it is important to acknowledge this dimension, danger needs to be re-conceptualised to encompass other forms of risks, which can include physical, emotional, ethical, and professional danger. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle's (2000) work, *Danger in the Field*, is thus instructive here. Using these categories of fear, which are not necessarily mutually distinct but interconnected, they argue that although risk in the field is a perturbing experience for researchers, it does to a large extent enrich understandings of the research site (2000:2). Of immediate interest is their discussion on the issue of emotional danger, by which they mean a serious threat to the researcher's emotional stability brought about by negative emotive states induced by the research process (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000:4). Therefore, this does not necessarily only refer to emotional discomfort, but also distress which can further extend into other areas of the researcher's life, such as her/his familial and other personal

relationships, or her/his professional connections with colleagues at work as a result of a gamut of considerations such as isolation, fear, loneliness, and despair in the field when such research is conducted from 'afar' (Vail, 2001) or at 'home', or even when such research contravenes with academic methodological 'conventions'.<sup>9</sup>

Emotional dangers encountered by researchers are also especially pertinent with respect to the study of religious and spiritual experiences. Palmer (2001), for instance, problematises the extent to which researchers should be open to spiritual beliefs and practices, and explores several of her own experiences in which she has been personally affected – both spiritually and emotionally – by her involvement in religious movement rituals and her encounters with their charismatic leaders. Zablocki (2001) similarly recounts a personal journey which made him realise the considerable power of religion in his life. As he puts it, 'religion has always terrified me especially when the Spirit is moving and has us in its thrall' (2001:227). Here, he reports his childhood mystical experiences that demonstrated 'how easy it would be to slip away entirely from the socially constructed world that parents and teachers called "reality"'. With the exception of such works and several others (see, for instance, Birckhead, 2004; Blanes, 2006), methodological quandaries with reference to emotional dangers faced by ethnographers of religion studying religious and spiritual experiences in relation to spirit interference are seldom documented and have yet to be given serious attention. The allure and privileging of 'rituals' in spirit interference, often typified as 'exciting' and 'exotic' in the eyes of readers and other academics (cf. Geschiere, 1997), have instead steered our attention away from these research processes that involve not only researchers' experience of intersecting dangers and fears studying such issues, but also her/his relations *beyond* the field site itself.

Here, I thus address a very narrow sliver of ethnographic detail in studying spirit interference: the usually emotionally charged and fearful experiences that affect both researcher and respondents. In this respect, my fieldwork from the onset was often located at the crossroads of 'unfamiliarity' (as discussed in the

preceding section) and fear. In spite of the fact that I have conducted research in physically risky contexts before, these situations, particularly when it involved the metaphysical, was an entirely new arena for me and remained difficult for me to confront emotionally. Under such circumstances and in retrospect, I felt that the most difficult experience during fieldwork was not 'how-to-do' this piece of research, or even gaining access, since this was achieved after persistent attempts, but facing and managing my fears, especially in regard to the degree of closeness I should establish with the afflicted family members in my field sites and how this in turn affected my data collection. The milieu in which I conducted participant observation was also not necessarily completely 'safe' – and neither did I feel entirely at ease or emotionally comfortable and secure at all times. In fact, 'home' offered little sense of 'refuge', 'comfort' and 'safety' to me in relation to my own personal experiences encountering the uncanny:

It doesn't help that many people in my personal and professional life, my family and peers especially, habitually advised me to take care of myself before I embarked on my participant observation: 'Be careful not to get too involved'; 'Make sure you don't trust what they say'; 'Try not to believe everything they tell you. They are not Islamic'; 'These are dangerous zones, so be careful'; and the inventory went on and on. I found this particularly irksome at first, but then when I observed my first healing ritual and heard Nurul [a respondent] screaming, I saw myself questioning my own beliefs of the uncanny, which was at that time, really disconcerting since I always avoided broaching the issue. Now the fear suddenly surged through my body in full-force.

(Field diary)

On the one hand, I found what they conveyed 'problematic' since professionally, these were the ascriptions and typifications that I had wanted to critically deconstruct. Yet, on the other hand, there were moments when such comments, thoughts, and biases resurrected especially when I was confronted with potentially 'dangerous' and fearful situations. These often became a burden to me, because inasmuch as I attempted to brush them aside, the more such thoughts reappeared and resurfaced, and often in

unexpected situations. These emotional processes made me construct certain images that positioned spirit mediums and members afflicted by spirit interference.

I incessantly asked myself: 'Would I really get 'hurt'? Are they as 'nice' as they looked? Would they expect me to participate in certain rituals which I did not want to engage in, but would be important in obtaining data? Would I get stigmatised by the more 'orthodox' Islamic scholars from the wider ummah (Islamic community) and beyond if they found out what I was researching? Would the food and drink offered by spirit mediums and other members in the families I observed be 'safe' to consume, given that food and drink are construed to be potential carriers of magical spells and incantations? Would my rejection of such food then reflect poorly on my position not only as a 'good researcher', but also an ill-mannered member of the Muslim community as well, for not following the norms of reciprocity and respect of consuming your hosts' food, which could then affect the data I collected and their willingness to talk to me? Would this rejection also reflect unfavourably on me as a 'good Muslim', given that other Muslims would reject the claims that food and drink were carriers of magic and sorcery, but instead regarded these as gifts from God, and that it was ludicrous to fear these beliefs?

(Field diary)

The kind of vulnerability and fear I experienced at such times is nevertheless difficult for me to describe and articulate, despite my mustering up all the emotional and spiritual courage I had.<sup>10</sup> At such times, I often thought about my family and other loved ones, and became intensely aware of my responsibilities and emotions towards them. I recognised that this initially slowed down my research during times when I could easily proceed further with my observations, interviews, and data collection. There were certain moments during my research where I wavered to venture further in the field site, especially in the beginning of my research, often assuming that these emotions would subside when I became 'more comfortable' in the field, which it did to a large extent, but there were always certain events that took place in the field when fear suddenly reared its menacing head. Hence, there was a constant oscillation of emotional valences on my part in the course of doing fieldwork, ranging from emotional thrills and excite-

ment to intense fear and panic, even within a span of several minutes. There were two out of several incidents which still continue to be etched in my memory until today that captures this fear I experienced fairly closely:

[Incident 1]: I finally managed to secure an interview with a bomoh (spirit intermediary), Nek Siyah, who was introduced to me by Delia (one of my relations)! I felt elated! Though I knew by now that I did not want to focus my study on rituals of spirit interference, this was extremely exciting news since it has been months before a bomoh or tukang ubat was willing to talk to me about their work, since I was told by most of my respondents that they were often known to be carriers of secret, spiritual knowledge. I nevertheless decided just to go into the interview process with an open mind and heart. When I entered into Nek Siyah's home, I was greeted by an elderly woman who was wearing a simple, nondescript baju kurung<sup>11</sup> and a tudung serkup<sup>12</sup>. She appeared robust and strong, even though she claimed she was well over seventy years of age and a great-grandmother. She was generally forthcoming about her work – asserting that she was a 'good Muslim' and always insisting she carried out the work of God, but did not go into much detail when I asked further. While the conversation I had with her was extremely engaging, it was often marked by moments of silent uneasiness and discomfiting stares. What struck me as extremely disquieting, however, was at the end of my interview, where she looked at me intensely, clasped my arm, and with a very low and deep voice, said:

- Nek Siyah: There are some things that I shouldn't have told you, *cu*<sup>13</sup>. But right now, since you are studying this [issue], you better be careful now where you go and walk...not under big trees, or be careful of the food that you eat at some places, ok? Don't offend anyone... What I tell you is private. You know if you let any of this known, you'll know what can happen to you or your family?.
- Noorman: Eh, what do you mean by that, *Nek*<sup>14</sup>?
- Nek Siyah: (laughs) Why are you afraid, *cu*? You are a good person. You don't have to worry. God is always here to protect you.

That felt extremely uncomfortable and unnerving thereafter, even though she laughed at me at the end and claimed that this was uttered only in jest, exclaiming very candidly that she had known this was part of my research and was 'aware' of my fear with the metaphysical, even though we had never communicated prior to this meeting! Her later claim that my close involvement with the 'victim' of a spiritual in-

curse she was attempting to heal and the close fictive kinship ties that emerged between the household and myself opened the possibility of malevolent spirits to harm me. Nonetheless, I thanked her for the interview, and walked away, always wary thereafter that 'something' was following me home from behind though, especially since it was quite late in the night, and I increasingly became paranoid. Was this really happening to me? Could something bad happen to me? I was supposed to talk to her again one of the days next week to talk about her life further. But should I really? I knew I was afraid, I could sense it in my heart, and I felt vulnerable, but my professional sociological and anthropological side wanted to see through the next interview. Though in this instance I did return to talk to her, since this was part of my professional training, I cannot deny that I was fearful and extremely uneasy during my next meeting with Nek Siyah.

(Fieldnotes; Interview)

[Incident 2]: It was already late at night – roughly about one in the morning – after Nurul's family discussed the best way to heal her. Nurul's aunt suggested that I sleep over, given that it was already late into the night and that it might not be too 'safe' (not in the literal sense of physical danger from a human attack, but rather in terms of spirit affliction), so I thought it would be alright to stay over just for today. I took a foldable soft mattress that she provided me and slept in the living room. In the middle of the night, I was suddenly jolted from my sleep when I heard Nurul scream hysterically and sniggering, speaking in a voice I couldn't even recognise. My hair on my hands and legs stood on ends immediately and I had goosebumps all over! I dashed to her room to see what was happening, only to come across a shadowed figure – later described to me by a relative as an Iblis (or devil) – over her countenance. The rest of the other family members were controlling her body down but I just stood there, dumbstruck and enveloped with fear, before Nurul, who by then was perspiring and breathless, fainted once again. I was shaken enough to not be able to note down all that transpired during this event, and even when I was able to trace back the events now to a certain extent as I write these down, I jump at the slightest of odd noises.

(Fieldnotes)

In addition, I had inexplicable, often vivid dreams, where either one of my family members or I was hurt. In these dreams, I remembered reciting Koranic verses very lucidly (i.e. acting and making very 'conscious' decisions in the dream to protect myself from spiritual

harm), where I usually found it very difficult to wrestle myself out from these dreams, even though I knew I desperately wanted to. I normally felt distressed, vulnerable, and emotionally sapped thereafter and I felt that it was difficult for me to carry out research further, though I was perennially advised by my respondents during periods of observation to take precautions to avoid recurring dreams.<sup>15</sup>

In many ways, this fear and 'unfamiliarity' never exactly subsided, though it did become less challenging. I was certain that I had to manage these fears more effectively, and unremittingly felt that my work could not progress effectively if I was not able to confront them head-on, or at the very least, address them gradually. The pressure from the field, the initial difficulty in gaining access given the sensitivity of spirit interference and the general shortage of time further made these enterprises very distressing for me. However, I came to realise that I needed to slowly experience this fear and the other concomitant emotions as an embodied researcher, given the fact that 'the emotional intensity of experiences with the paranormal can enable anthropology and other disciplines to further harness and advance ethnographic knowledge and practices' (Lee, 1987:69). Similar to Yamagishi's (2005) work on illegal male host-club workers in Tokyo where she reports encountering similar quandaries, this cacophony of emotions and fears acted as a constructive force and important regulatory check that propelled me through my periods of participant observation, which also prevented me from actualising these schemes. Many times, it seemed as though researchers were presented as semi-robotic, *gungho*, and fearless practitioners capable of doing fieldwork seamlessly and without many glitches. These were especially augmented in the case of male researchers, who were often socialised both personally and professionally to be 'emotionally-immune' and capable of suppressing their emotions, given that the acknowledgment of their fears could in effect potentially 'threaten' their masculinities, particularly in front of their professional colleagues and peers (c.f. Behar, 1996; Carter & Delamont, 1988; Rosaldo, 2007). In other words, 'maleness' is not necessarily seen as advantageous, especially since the norm of masculine

emotional stoicism (Kimmel, 1996; Sattel, 1998), has been strongly entrenched in relation to appropriate gender performance in research cultures.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, I decided that I did not intend to continue to potentially risk my emotional and spiritual well-being for 'a few lines of extraordinary data' or for the sake of protecting my own 'masculinity'. It was immaterial to me whether these 'fears' and anxieties were constructed or unfounded; what was at stake was my own 'safety', and emotional and spiritual well-being, which were important personal priorities during the course of my fieldwork. Following Goode and Hatt (1981:121; c.f. Zablocki, 2001), I acknowledged, among other things, that I did not necessarily need to participate in and attend all the healing rituals, particularly those that were regarded as potentially risky by my respondents themselves. Instead my strategy was to remain open and willing to other experiences and practices, given that 'the sociologist need not carry out exactly the same activities as others, in order to be a participant observer' (Goode & Hatt, 1981:121). Though this is relatively common among ethnographers, I found that it was useful in these moments to record my feelings and emotions as candidly as possible to myself in a personal field diary or intersperse these in my field notes. In the field, it also helped that I brought along objects such as printed religious scriptures and a family photo, which were sources of 'comfort' and reassurance, even though 'home', for me, was no more than an hour's drive away. Nevertheless, these ameliorated some of the tense and lonely moments I experienced in the field when I felt helpless, vulnerable, and consumed with fear, which at times reminded me of my earlier childhood during the demise of my great-grandmother.

More crucially, and what also became most prevalent in the course of my research, is that the focal point of preponderate methodological literature tends to draw attention on respondent-researcher relationships, and not beyond the research setting itself. In other words, the privileging of respondent-researcher relationships, while of course extremely important arteries of field research, does not take into consideration researchers and their relationships with those beyond their research site in their personal sphere and

affective contexts in research writing, though with some exceptions. These include (non-exhaustively) their children, spouses, parents, siblings, friends, lovers, and other relations. As such, the status of the field as a space discrete from one's own personal life largely persists, where the world of familial relations appear as a separate, if not less pertinent methodological category, notwithstanding several interventions that attempt to reconfigure the field (see, for instance, Grindal & Salamone, 2006; Howell, 1990; Sutton, 1998).<sup>17</sup> Correspondingly, the research one ventures into and how far a researcher goes in one's research occasionally depends on one's interaction with one's immediate social relations and support in one's private sphere. In fact, Sutton (1998) demonstrates how familial life and ethnographic fieldwork reciprocally and productively inform each other. In this respect, the entire research agenda is enmeshed in a set of social relations in and out of the field, which need to be taken seriously, and is oftentimes neglected in research methodologies when the 'distanced' researcher is seen only to relate to her/his immediate research site and respondents.

In research such as mine, there were several persons who were especially concerned for my personal 'safety', particularly my immediate family members. An earlier discussion with my mother and grandmother in relation to my selection of fieldwork is an example to illustrate this point:

- Ani (Mother): Why do you always have to choose such sites for your research? Why don't you ask any one of your colleagues in the department whether they would allow their son, daughter or their loved ones to conduct research in such 'dangerous' places?
- Noorman: Don't worry. I know how to take care of myself. I know when to back down.
- Ani: Yes, but look, some of the practices are okay, but many are morally wrong. It's *syirik* to believe in such things...
- Grandmother: Yes, listen to us. Look at me before, someone sent 'something' to me after I married your grandfather. It isn't funny, you know. You can't get out from this spiritual trouble once you are involved. And you will make us worried.

Here, the issue of my own personal religious beliefs was very pertinent for her since this concerned the possibility of me transgressing ‘moral’ and spiritual religious coda, which could potentially be idolatrous (*syirik*). No matter how many times I reassured all of them that I could manage it and knew my own boundaries, they were often displeased and frustrated with me for my purported moral ‘irresponsibility’ towards the spiritual well-being of my family, given that my close involvement with the afflicted ‘victims’ of spiritual interference could possibly ‘affect’ my immediate family members and loved ones based on our close affective bonds. My anger and frustration made me uncomfortable. On some days, I believed this was justified; while on other days, I felt angry at myself for being angry at them.

Often, I would hear the same oft-repeated issues not only from Mummy and Nyayi [grandmother], but also from my other friends: ‘Those people [bomohs] are good for nothing’; ‘Are you sure this is all worth it?’; ‘What about your religious beliefs and convictions? What about us?’, and so forth. It’s so frustrating and tiring to explain all the time. I know I have to be a so-called ‘professional’ as a sociologist-in-training, distancing myself from the rest. But when I think about this more seriously, we researchers are not only part of the academic community, but we also have different positions and moral obligations to others. I had an obligation and duty to my loved ones, as much as those who I was studying. Damn! I hate this feeling. No matter where I went, these thoughts haunted me. I hated it, hated the unnecessary suffering both they and I had to endure, hated my own incompetence in managing the issue. And sometimes my fear during some moments in the field only makes their point more valid. I need to find a way to balance this. Oh why did I choose to get myself into this topic? ...

(Field diary)

Indeed, was my relationship with my family members an example of me impeding my need to proceed further with data collection? Were their ‘fears’ and emotions totally unfounded? I eventually decided, however, after several weeks into fieldwork, that it was more appropriate that I did not inform my family of my progress any longer because I had made the decision to do this research on my own, and for my own self. As self-interested as this may be, I had wanted to

protect my interests and also make sure I was not considered a ‘burden’ to my family members and other loved ones so that they would ultimately not excessively worry about me or put them in any risk or danger, given the relatively short time I had in the field. As such, I decided to only inform my closest friends in Singapore of my whereabouts in the later half of my research and depended on them during moments of emotional duress. I realised that by doing so, I was able to manage and assuage my ‘guilt’ in a more effective manner: I was able to then collect data more effectively, and moved in and out of the field with better ease, without the ‘bias’ and fear of having to hear what my family had to say. This did not mean that I did not weigh their interests or advice; on the contrary, it made me consider more carefully how far I would be able to endure and experience such fears and dangers in the field against a gamut of advice and suggestions I received from them and many concerned others. Moreover, the flexibility to change my research strategies is essential in risk-management in the field, given that I seriously considered the extent to which I was prepared to adapt my interests and methods in order to manage my emotional and other types of dangers that arose.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in these instances, there was undoubtedly fear experienced, but I discovered that there was indeed a need to negotiate and manage my feelings of anger, fear and other emotions I went through, and that these brief scenarios further reinforced the call to examine non-respondent relationships (i.e. within the ‘private’ realm of the researcher) with much more significant attention.

### Managing ‘Vulnerability’

These multiple fears and problems surfaced at different points of time in my fieldwork, and are by no means exhaustive, even after my fieldwork was completed. Often, it has been noted that not all academic institutions may provide sufficient support framework for researchers ‘in the field’. How do we understand and deal with fear and vulnerability in the field, such as in cases of spirit interference? What are some of the necessary methodological initiatives one could possi-

bly follow when confronted with dilemmas surrounding issues of emotions, risk, and other dangers? Of course, the intention here is not to prescribe hard-and-fast rules that stifle the independence of the researcher in the field, but instead, it is hoped that this visibility and awareness provide an outlet for ethnographers to possibly employ such strategies that move beyond mere speculation, 'intuition' and the oft-quoted but vague conception of 'common-sense' when encountering dangers in the field.

### *Institutional*

1. Informally organise open discussion and sharing exercises with advisors and faculty before, during, and after fieldwork to establish social support networks and a non-threatening academic community. I found that these mentoring networks are especially important sources for younger researchers who may feel debilitated and emotionally strained as a result of fieldwork. Most researchers, like our respondents, may not be able to endure constant solitude, anguish, confusion, and suffering in the field, though some may thrive in such environments. In the same way, researchers should not be afraid to express candidly their distress and fears to those they feel comfortable to talk to, even if they may not have researched exactly what they were doing. I came to realise from my own study in that it was very important to cultivate an institutional milieu that enabled both faculty and students to do this, without the professional fear that they would be regarded as less able researchers as compared to others. This support is necessary in helping researchers such as me to work through difficult issues encountered in the field, as Nilan (2002:375) amongst others have noted. Faculty who have encountered similar experiences should be encouraged to be sensitive to such distress to enhance better collegiality and scholarship. For instance, Singer et al. (2001) meted out several procedures that included sponsoring staff training designed to review ethical and safety issues, and other difficulties of street ethnography, as well as establishing a peer support meeting called 'Address Your Stress', where members were able to share their experiences and concerns with other co-workers.

2. From these exercises and informal discussion sessions, establish flexible and broad guidelines (not didactic or authoritative) and (optional) training especially for young researchers to address not only physical dangers in the field, but the management of vulnerable periods. These skills that are predicated on the accumulated wisdom and experience of senior faculty are rarely shared or disseminated openly.

3. Reiterate the pragmatic part of fieldwork, such as the importance of sufficient funding and the need to have adequate insurance coverage (whether medical/financial or/and 'emotional'), and that institutional help will be rendered in times of need. Provide faculty and students with alternative resource hotlines or other avenues (faith-based groups; psychologists; self-help groups; informal chats; etc.) which may be useful for them to turn to in the event they may face with moments of vulnerability. As a matter of policy, however, committee members should be prepared to look at particular cases where such concerns legitimately place emotional demands on student/faculty resources, and consider extending the deadlines of projects/dissertations, funding, etc.

### *Personal*

1. Prior to entering the field, researchers should appraise as realistically and critically as possible, from the literature available, or from those who have conducted similar work before, or from other popular sources, the types and extent of 'danger' researchers could possibly encounter, and try to identify these potential sources of danger (whether emotional, spiritual, etc.), no matter how uncertain this may be. If possible, they should try to go to the proposed field site for an exploratory visit, which I recognise some researchers may not be given the opportunity to do. Attempt to determine thereafter whether they would be prepared to take on the potential risks involved, and the emotional remedies to employ to manage and/or eliminate them. In my case, I weighed and negotiated the alternatives carefully, and considered how my research had affected not only myself emotionally and spiritually, but my relations beyond the field itself. In the event where these risks reach an intolerable

level as determined by the researchers themselves that could result in the termination of their research, they should recognise as well that this does not mean they are professionally inept, or that their research lacks depth and 'excellence'.

2. There are other practical issues that can help minimise the possibility of any emotional and spiritual issues. When I was not abroad, I always informed my closest friends of where I was going and with whom I was going to interview, and always made sure they contacted me after a certain designated time to make sure I was at home.

3. While doing fieldwork, it is important to be candid and straightforward to respondents (but researchers should recognise that they may interpret this differently). In my case, many of my respondents recognised my sincerity and good intentions (*niat baik*), which were pertinent pre-requisites to ensure their emotional and spiritual interests were protected. This helped me to also collect data more easily, and made them more forthcoming in their responses. In addition, flexibility is essential in danger-management. Researchers should consider how far they are prepared to adapt their interests and methods in order to manage emotional and other types of danger that may arise. It is pertinent that the dangers encountered are not downplayed and taken lightly as a sort of 'adventure', no matter how 'nice' and 'cordial' respondents or the milieu may present themselves to be.

4. Though this is relatively common among ethnographers, it also needs to be reiterated that researchers should record their feelings and emotions as honestly as possible to themselves in a personal diary or journal, particularly any insecurities or fears experienced before, during, and after fieldwork. In the field, it helps to bring an object which is a source of comfort and reassurance to them (be this a scripture, a childhood toy, a family photo, etc.). This helped me manage some of the tense and lonely moments in the field when I felt helpless, vulnerable, and consumed with fear.

5. When faced with emotional difficulties, and if at all possible, take a break from the field, which I did and relieved much of the distress I was going through. This may be difficult for those who conduct their research away from their 'home', but even having a respite away from the research site to another setting, may emotionally help (Of course, this is largely contingent on the exigencies of time, financial means, etc., but this break from the field helps researchers to recuperate emotionally, as I have learnt from my own experience).

### Concluding Remarks

As a researcher and human social actor, one cannot simply observe passively without reaction or emotions. Ethnographers are thus persons as well as embodied scholars with their bevy of personal and professional beliefs, emotions, idiosyncrasies, fears, and other emotional experiences that meander right beside them within and beyond the field they are engaged in, as well as the lattice of affiliations that affect and reconfigure their experiences and observations in the field, and their research practice. In this respect, this chapter also emphasises the need to incorporate and make more visible the somewhat ambivalent issue of the position of researchers in relation to the fears and various forms of 'dangers' they encounter during fieldwork. Howell further noted that:

Taking risks and being unprepared for their consequences is, by and large, not negatively sanctioned and may even be highly approved... The audience seems to focus on how brave, not how foolish, the investigator was. Late at night at parties at anthropology meetings... senior scholars compare liver damage, broken bones, spectacular truck repairs and degree of isolation from help when things went wrong. The knowledge that such disasters can be fatal... seems to add spice to the discussion (1986:6).

My research on and experiences of spirit interference is thus aimed at raising important methodological issues in terms of the potential risks beyond physical danger to include as well the emotional and spiritual dangers experienced when conducting vulnerable social research in relation to my

multiple positionings not only as a social researcher, but also as a Singaporean, Muslim, son, brother, and friend beyond the researcher-researched relationship. While Jamieson (2000:61-72) argues that dangers are dealt with in situ when experienced, this does not mean, however, that these fears and emotions are never totally manageable. Inasmuch as we attempt to be responsible to our respondents in the field to ensure their personal safety, it is also important that we, as social researchers, also have a duty to ourselves and others important in our lives to openly recognise and alleviate the different types 'dangers' that we may potentially experience from the field both professionally and personally in making our voyage through the long tunnel better informed and constructive both for ourselves and our respondents in such temporal and social contexts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'vulnerability' used here does not make reference to blanket policy approaches that do not adequately account for 'their own life-world, capacities, and strategies of the people as actors, nor on the structural and institutional context and dynamics of their position in society and economy' (Nageeb, 2008:245; see also Lachenmann, 1999). Rather, 'vulnerability' precisely moves beyond the simplified 'victimisation' of social actors in such policy approaches, and recognises instead – given the reflexive turn in methodology – the agency of these actors, admitting in so doing that the experiences of vulnerability can also be both debilitating and meaningful lived experiences for social researchers and respondents alike (see Behar, 1996; Behar & Gordon, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> These are recent samples of work from the ethnographic mill that address the importance of reflexivity in fieldwork accounts. Historically, interest in reflexivity and personal experiences as a pertinent aspect of ethnography has been growing since the 1960s and 1970s (Crapanzano, 1970; Powdermaker, 1966; Scholte, 1980). These include earlier individual reports on particular field experiences in books, periodicals, edited thematic collections, diary accounts, and

letters (see, for instance, Malinowski, 1967; Mead, 1977), presumably not intended for publications, and book-length travelogues and fictionalised accounts (see Bohannan, 1964), though these works, of course, were not without critical appraisals and controversies. <sup>3</sup> Interestingly, issues of risks and dangers are not adequately and seriously addressed in the corpus of literature on general research methods and the experience of fieldwork, especially in regard to the context in which researchers carry out their work, though again with some notable exceptions (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000; Lee, 1995; Sluka, 1990). Howell (in Sluka, 1990:115) further notes that: '[T]he field copes with that danger not by rational preparation, but by denial. Students aren't warned, they aren't instructed, and after their "trial by fire", they don't come back and change the system' (1986:9). Geschiere (1997:20) also interestingly narrates a testimony by and emotional experiences of Eric de Rosny, a French priest who had been introduced to spirit *nganga* healers in Duala and his subsequent and regular interaction with them.

<sup>4</sup> Though this trend is gradually changing, much of such literature continues to sanctify many sacred methodological canons. These include the conventions that hail the fearless and heroic character of social researchers (Fincham, 2006; Vail, 2001), who in turn privileges the rights and safety of respondents over their own (Madjar & Higgins, 1996; Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006). In other words, researchers, particularly anthropologists, are assumed to be able to 'rough it out' and 'get dirty' in the field, the experiences from which many are fixated with and proudly wear as a badge of their academic resilience and hardiness. Further, they often contend that social research, with the exception of a few, is safe, and that at present, 'common sense' or 'sixth sense' are believed to be all that a researcher requires when entering research settings (Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Williams, et al., 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Ethnographic knowledge has frequently been marked between these two epistemologies. However, the broadly shared commitment amongst most cultural anthropologists (especially in the United States) is to an 'epistemology of intimacy', which is generally

centred on the methodological imperative for self-interpretation and an interpretation of the observed 'other' as a source of legitimate understanding. Additionally, it also adheres to a belief that human agency is generally capable of confronting and moving beyond 'structural' constraints (Keane, 2005:62), where social actors negotiate their room for manoeuvre (see also Lachenmann, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Risk is usually 'objectively' framed in mathematical terms as the statistical probability of a normally severe outcome or undesirable consequence, whereby its effect is construed as a 'cost' that could be calculated and measured in terms of deaths, cases of ill health, money, and so forth (Beck, 1992; Boholm, 2003). Boholm (2003:161), however, also argues that its conceptualisation combines both descriptive/'factual' and normative components that are open to negotiation and contestation. Japp notes that risk has 'no *a priori* content, but rather always only differences which occasion descriptions from one side or the other (experts or laymen) and thus making these descriptions available for the identification of further content' (2000, as cited in Burgess, 2006:4). These frameworks, however, need to be extended further, as I will illustrate in due course.

<sup>7</sup> I document elsewhere this need for research to be more 'full-bodied' (Abdullah, 2010). Suffice it to note here that Rudberg (1997:182) similarly contended that the 'Western' cultural tendency to detach body from mind, and to raise the cerebral over the corporeal, has trivialised the extent to which the body is an obvious point of departure for any process of knowing, especially during participant observation.

<sup>8</sup> Compared with other disciplines and occupations that openly address safety issues (Bibby, 1994; Brown, et al., 1986; Green, 1992; Norris, 1990), most sociological and anthropological studies that do engage with issues of risk and danger are concerned, amongst others, with crime (Ferrell, 1998; Polsky, 1971), violent political conflict (Brewer, 1990; Nash, 1976; Nordstrom, 1995; Reinhartz, 1979; Sluka, 1990), 'marginal' communities in urbanised settings, such as drug users and dealers (Becker, 1966; Jacobs, 1998; McKeganey, 1990; Singer, et al, 2001; Tourigny, 2004; Williams, et al., 1992), street gangs (Liebow,

1967; Whyte, 1955), sensation-seeking recreational pursuits (Lyng, 1990; Holyfield, 1999), as well as work and employment (Fincham, 2006; Lois, 2001). Contemporary accounts that do give primacy to the issues of risk and danger inherent in fieldwork situations can be found in the works of Howell (1990), Lee (1995), and Norstrom and Robben (1995), which bring together reflexive research experiences in the field that systematically discusses the methodological dilemmas researchers personally face. Such works also acknowledge the appeal for researchers to possess an experiential understanding of the field, where 'the researcher's feelings of threat and vulnerability may indicate that they are closer to understanding an important aspect of the field than perhaps when things are going on well' (Peterson, 2000:195). There has also been a concerted attention given to the potential dangers encountered by female researchers such as sexual harassment, assault, and hustling (Coffey, 2002; Gurney, 1985; Sampson & Thomas, 2003; Warren, 1988; Warren & Rasmussen, 1977), though there is interestingly a noticeable lack of consideration on male researchers and the advantages and disadvantages masculinity affords them, with some exceptions (Sattel, 1998). In fact, some books have noted that researcher risk to physical health and the contraction of infectious and parasitic diseases such as hepatitis and malaria in particular have been acknowledged and given more attention to (Lee, 1995; Sampson & Thomas, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Vanderstaay (2005) took up these concerns in his work regarding a teenage cocaine dealer named Clay, and the events that led to Clay's murder of his mother's friend. Vanderstaay considers the connection this case study has to issues and questions of researcher responsibility towards the safety of research subjects, as well as the emotional implications and stress encountered by fieldworkers such as him who research on drug users and sellers. To manage the dilemmas researchers can potentially encounter, he suggests that a review of similar experiences faced by other ethnographers can help researchers better anticipate the problems they would face prior to entering the field.

<sup>10</sup> Kim (2002) similarly describes his previous field-

work in Korea, where he found it difficult to describe his emotional involvement in the field, even after his return to his university. Similarly, after my return from the field everyday, I found it difficult to come to terms with certain emotional moments I had experienced and could not talk about them as freely as I did before, unlike my past fieldwork experiences.

<sup>11</sup> *Baju kurung* here refers to a loose-fitting two-piece long-sleeved dress normally worn by Malay women. The loose long-sleeved top typically reaches the knees over the similarly loose long skirt usually made from the same fabric as the top. There is also a male equivalent of *baju kurung*, which typically consists of a loose-fitting long-sleeved shirt with a round mandarin collar made of satin or cotton, accompanied by a loose fitting pair of pants of the same fabric. Occasionally, the pants are substituted with a batik sarong wrap.

<sup>12</sup> This refers to an elastic cap-like bonnet to cover the hair of Muslim women popular in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Only the women's hair, which is tucked under the cap (*serkup*), and ears are covered, while the neck is exposed. Usually, women combine this and a scarf (*selendang*) over the cap to cover their head and neck.

<sup>13</sup> *Cu* is an abbreviated form for *cucu*, which is Malay for grandchild.

<sup>14</sup> *Nek* is Malay for grandmother, or a term of address given to elderly women.

<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon is commonly known as *tertindeh*, and was similarly and interestingly also experienced by some of my respondents, particularly those who were close to the afflicted family member. Often, during other periods of observation, I was also advised to not 'stay too near to the "victim"', or to make sure I washed my hands, face, and feet and take a bath immediately once I reached home.

<sup>16</sup> Sattel (1998) explains further in regard to the differences of experiences in the field, particularly the centrality of inexpressiveness among men: 'To effectively wield power, one must be able both to convince others of the rightness of the decisions one makes and to guard against one's own emotional involvement in the consequences of that decision... A little boy must become inexpressive not simply because our culture expects boys to be inexpressive, but because our cul-

ture expects little boys to grow up to become decision makers and wielders of power' (Sattel, 1998:425). Other scholars also show how maleness is not a safeguard while doing fieldwork. For instance, male researchers working in conventionally 'female' domains have reported problems where efforts to secure interviews have been construed as 'sexual advances' or attempts to set up 'dates' (see, for instance, Kenyon & Hawker, 1999; Sparke, 1996; cf. female researchers working in 'male' domains)

<sup>17</sup> In fact, this is reflected in most ethnographic monographs, where such relations often appear in prefaces, dedications, and acknowledgements, but not in the core chapters or methodology.

<sup>18</sup> It is pertinent that the dangers encountered by researchers are not downplayed and taken lightly as a sort of 'adventure', no matter how 'affable' and 'cordial' respondents or the milieu may present themselves to be. Whether certain rumours in regard to potential dangers that may be encountered in the field are 'true' or otherwise, these should nevertheless be reflected upon and dealt with seriously – regardless of whether this is a physical, emotional, or spiritual risk.

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