This paper is concerned with the ways scientists are engaged in finding research objects. More particularly, it deals with the role of emotions and affects during the research process. There is a long and thorough discussion within the social sciences’ methodology about the ways objects of inquiry should be identified. Quite a few authors have described idealized ways of approaching objects, actors, situations and gathering data about those phenomena. There are a lot of texts about the ways epistemic objects are constructed and brought into existence by writing about them. What is striking about those “tales of the field” (van Maanen) are at least two aspects: The first is the one-sided focus on success. Research accounts are usually conceptualised as modern tales of a heroic researcher who can solve every research problem if not easily than at least successfully.\[1] If the resistances and the failures of the research process become part of the presentations at all, they only appear as challenges that were managed well, neglecting their rather complex intertwining in the whole process. As the Australian sociologists Malpas and Wickham put it: “Sociology, like all modern social sciences, concentrates most of its energy on success.”\[2] Related to the first problem, the second shortcoming of those tales of the field concerns the apparent affective neutrality of the research process.\[3] Although there are some intriguing books on the practices of fieldwork as well as studies concerned with the emotions of the actors involved, there is only little discussion about the entanglements of affect and research practice.\[4] The research process seems to follow the credo of an analytical and neutral endeavour. It is this second aspect I want to focus on in the following by identifying three typical research situations and ask for their very research object and the role emotions and affects play in such situations. I will argue that the identification of a research object is crucially linked to the researcher’s emotions and to the affects in the specific process of doing research.

Considering the subjective position of the ethnographer, emotions and situational affects are always part of the research process, and if it is only to elude them. While I am building on rich and ongoing discussions within the emotions and affectivity research community,\[5] I will omit an in-depth discussion of differences between the concepts of emotions, feelings or affects in favour of a detailed look at situational assemblages of moods, objects, rhythms and subjects in three different cases from the field. However, a few words are necessary to provide a rough sketch of
my use of those heavily discussed terms. I will speak of emotions to conceptualise a rather fixed shape of sentiments. Emotions are more or less embedded in a cultural and verbal environment. They are a solidified and addressable quality. Instead, by focusing on affects the undecidable character of sentiments is addressed, including a more vague but still sensible notion of feeling. Following Deleuze/Guattari’s often cited understanding of affects as something pre-cultural the quality of such oscillations seems to be less defined: Affects are entangled with percepts, sensations that cannot be properly described. At the same time, both terms, emotion and affect, represent attempts to overcome the subjective bias and integrate a material and bodily performance practice by indicating the affect as well as the emotion as something between an object and an interpreting subject. This helps us consider subjects and objects both as co-constitutive participants of a situationally specific, causal relationship, in which we cannot know beforehand whether it is the actors or the objects that are responsible for the sensed and perceived qualities. In short, I am going to use the term emotions to refer to known sociocultural expressions of feelings, while with affects I describe less-defined situational moods. Both dimensions can build upon another if we conceptualize emotions as a specific interpretation of an affective state or the blurriness of an emotion as the sign for the presence of affects. The conceptual differences will become clearer in the following examples.

Stepping into the realm of creative mystery

The first situation I want to examine highlights a common starting problem in ethnographic field work: How to get access to the field? In my research I was interested in the practices people perform to produce something they refer to (and sell) as “creative”. I wanted to understand the secret mystery of the creative industries. To put it in a research question: How do the actors meet the daily demand for “creative products”? By following the actors, actions and objects within creative workplaces I wanted to shed light on the social accomplishment of creativity, that means on production practices and the objects entangled with these performative processes. To get a firm grip on the practical dimension of creative labour I conducted an ethnographic case study in the advertising industry, focusing on daily working activities. For over six months in 2008 and 2009 I was employed as a copywriting trainee in two advertising agencies. The reason why I became a copywriting trainee was tightly linked to the impermeability of the field. “Immune reactions” (Stephan Wolff) from within the field resulted in refused applications for research positions. I tried instead to cast a net by conducting interviews with different advertising professionals. In these interviews I realised that my approach to ask for a guest-research-position had been the wrong strategy. The place for novices in the field seemed to be a traineeship in an agency’s art department. Since I considered myself not gifted enough with graphic design skills I applied for a copywriting position. To be accepted for a traineeship the applicant has to pass a test – the so called “copy test”.

The copy test as an entry point transforms field access into an assignment with clear rules. This turns the copy test itself, usually a multi-page document where the applicant is asked to produce copies, claims, spots, scribblings etc., into an interesting kind of document for the researcher. Today it may lose more and more its importance, but some years ago it could be considered the gate that youngsters of the field had to stride through. To apply with a copy test takes some reasonable amount of time – they say it takes about ten days – and even if you hand in your copy test an internship is not guaranteed. Apparently, it represents a demanding object and requires certain skills I myself didn’t have or at least I didn’t know whether I had them. It forces you to give ideas a form (even if you don’t have any ideas) and it thereby “objectifies” the process of generating ideas as much as the process of application. It connects you with the people you want to convince that you are an interesting trainee and at the same time it makes them present in a mediated way. It prepares and reorganizes a certain affective potential of an interview situation in which sympathy levels and gestures are negotiated as much as thoughts - for the copy test itself is an affective medium.

All in all, the interaction with such a document may create a certain anxiety in regards to the odds for field access. Am I good enough? What happens if I fail? This might be my last chance, the decisive moment of my whole research endeavour?
Apparently, these affective attachments point to an uncertain and unseizable future. Like other phenomena of in-betweenness (and their subjective instantiations like trust) the affectivity of an application process does not fully translate into discursive certainty and knowledge. It derives its power from the unspoken and pre-propositional. The copy test is a powerful and hopeful thing at the same time. Such a quality highlights the test as a recognizable object, as a thing one has to deal with if one wishes to enter the field. It is this very resistance, this special affectivity I sensed, which suddenly transferred an object of anxiety into an object of inquiry.

I am arguing that my increased interest in the copy test as an object of inquiry is tightly linked to the affective state I encountered and struggled with before I could even think of conceptually naming and integrating these sentiments into theoretical frameworks. The interaction with the copy test evoked such a strong affective involvement that it generated attention which finally was canalised as academix attention. Following the basic ethnographic question “What the hell is going on” (Clifford Geertz in an interview with Gary A. Olsen) the researcher has to rely on her own sensorial engagement with the object which includes feelings of attachment that might be blurry at the moment of encounter. That does not render a systematic and less emotionally involved mode of inquiry unnecessary; however, acknowledging the affective dimension might help in finding interesting and important research objects. So I, for instance, started asking questions: How can an object unfurl so much power? What does such an object do to my attention as a researcher? May I learn something about the field by examining its entry points?

Turning to those questions also minimized the brute force of the object and helped me to balance my own emotional budget in that it incited a desire to shift modes - from seeking employment back to research - and to reconsider the role of the object - from a challenge into a research object. But the reverse effect is everything but inconceivable: Resistant and affect-evoking objects might also produce repulsion. They can annoy the researcher in a way that she is relieved when leaving it behind. Either way, affective encounters in the research process do guide attention and regulate engagement.

### Sensing it right

Let’s take a little leap within the research trajectory and move forward to my traineeship in an advertising agency. I eventually succeeded in getting access through a combination of my copy test application and a net of helpful contacts. Once I started my work in the agency my specific double role as a researcher and an intern was forgotten quite quickly, leaving me with my new role as copywriting trainee. I was part of all everyday working situations that other employees had to face: writing copies, attending brainstormings, negotiating deadlines with the account guys, brewing up, walking the dog and so on. Given I found the time, I was collecting data about and in certain situations; especially situations that I believed to represent the mundane agenda of agency life.

Collecting data was not always easy. Let’s take brainstorming situations for example. I tried to take some pictures of the room and materials after the sessions had ended, and I wrote my field protocols in the evening. In some occasions I was able to record an audio file of such brainstorming sessions. What I figured out after a while was that in these brainstorming situations something happened that I couldn’t quite get to terms with using the usual sociological or social-anthropological vocabulary. There was something opaque about the situation, an emergence that escaped the usual categories of individuals, interactions, groups, hierarchies, power etc. At the end of such brainstormings there was a list with different ideas, but why specifically those ideas made it on the list I could not quite understand.

Why are some ideas considered worth following while others are discarded? How do the protagonists identify good ideas? Without more information about the context I wasn’t able to answer those questions. When I asked colleagues about their strategies they usually answered with a variation of the phrase “oh, yes that is my ‘experience’”. In order to make sense of such slippery vocabulary as “experience” I re-evaluated my audio files and fieldnotes to find something I would call the ‘sense of a right idea’[9] While my interlocutors often pretended to know that an idea is the right one, I suspect that ‘sensing’ is a more adequate concept to describe the process. By
trying to remember the last idea sessions and being very attentive in the next ones, I figured out that sensing a right idea was not necessarily a reflexive, propositional or positive knowledge. It seemed to be an affective attachment towards some ideas and an affective neutrality towards others. After a while I noticed that even I was weighing ideas by a hidden script rather than well and long thought reasons. My “sensing the right idea” skills were not always congruent with the others but they met quite frequently.

I became attentive to this dimension and started looking for those moments in which a ‘good idea’ would emerge. I started listening to my field recordings again and found different characteristics of situations where ideas were marked as good. On the level of everyday “talk” I could observe an increase in alternating and overlapping speech acts, a higher frequency of turn-takings and a general verbal reaction towards an emerging idea by every participant. In addition, I found that the people were gesturing a lot in such situations and they used to create drawings. I labelled it an “atmosphere of active tension” which emerges as a result of interactions between different people, activities and materials. I use the term atmosphere to illustrate that sensing must be understood as a collective effort and achievement. In contrast to a great deal of contemporary literature on creativity[10] I argue that in those situations several people and several objects are involved in producing an affective state of idea-sensing. But before entering this analytical mode of theorizing and reflecting on complexity theory and epistemology, I first and foremost had learned something as a participant of the field. Linking this to the overall topic of this short paper you could say it was my own involvement as sensory being within the affective assemblage of the situation which enabled me to attend, attune myself to and eventually interpret this practice of knowledge production as such. For me the sensing of an idea transformed into the sensing of a research object. To put it bluntly: Affective and emotional attention can be considered an epistemological technique for identifying and analysing research problems in ethnographic research.

De-Affection and Re-Affection

Finally I fast forward again on the timeline of my research trajectory to being back at my desk at the university. I would like to shed some light on the context of discovery in the work with field protocols. Scientific texts are usually considered as emotionless genre of writing. Starting with the early fieldnotes, followed by the later field protocols, then analytical notes, succeeded by draft versions of a manuscript and finally a published article, the academic is encouraged to remove all traces of personal feelings towards the research object. In its extremes it sometimes seems as if the author had been erased.

Such an “undoing of agency” has been criticised by a number of authors, most prominently in the social anthropological “writing culture debate”[11]. Despite all the methodological achievements this discussion brought it still seems as if the ideal of scientific text genres is still emotional neutrality. This should not come as a surprise if one considers the special textual category which is used to manufacture knowledge about different “cultures”.

Let us take the example of field protocols. At first sight they follow a simple logic of representation since they are supposed to represent the situation as observed by the researcher. The author and her emotions are supposed to vanish between the lines of a more or less neutral description (i.e. without subjective tendencies). But at the same time field protocols can not entirely fulfil this scientific desire for neutrality since they are subjective documents reflecting the position of the researcher and functioning as highly selective memory trace. Field protocols are supposed to remind the researcher of certain situations, while being organized as allegedly neutral descriptions.[12] In the literature you can find a mixture of those two performances – to remember and to represent. It is especially the second one which is usually mentioned to cement the neutrality of research descriptions.[13] However, by neglecting the non-neutrality and affective disposition of fieldnotes and protocols we are destined to miss out on an extremely valuable resource for doing ethnographic research.

If we look a little closer at the practices of writing within research situations we can differentiate traces of affectivity (i.e. of emotive excess, of that feeling which has not yet been given its proper name) in different text genres. Take the early fieldnotes and the later field protocols. While
fieldnotes are often barely systematized and marked by volatility and incompleteness, field protocols follow a linear mode of explanation, a more extensive capturing of a situation. The first one is written while literally being in the field – in my case while being a copywriter. You write down small pieces of information, parts of sentences, some words you consider meaningful in the situation. Later on, being back at your desk at home you prepare the more elaborated field protocols. After my business day I took some time and added aspects I still had on my mind, completed sentences and offered first analytical connections. By doing so I produced a much more consistent form of text and at the same time reduced evidence of my affective and emotional involvement.

The fieldnotes still carry some traces of emotions and affective potentials; you can guess one’s anger by the depth of the pencil imprint, you see one’s frustration by the selection of words and exclamation marks (“and again! I was asked to do…”), you can find traces of joy in emotion-like drawings and corresponding expressions. Behind and between the defined descriptors you sense the original affective involvement without having pinpointed a word for it yet. In the next step of the field protocol such emotive traces are gone. Of course one can still read, “I disliked being asked several times to…” but this is only an account of those emotions that have already become the topic of the research rather than its resource. So the processes of data interpretation and text (re)production seem to increasingly neutralise the affective potentials and emotive links to fieldnotes and to the represented situation itself.

At the same time, new affective and emotive qualities emerge. First, the field protocol itself functions as an aesthetic object that follows rhetorical rules of persuasion. It tries to convince the researcher that it transports interesting aspects. The emotive quality emerges as a promise of dense and material-rich description: That there is more to it. Second, field protocols capture and direct attention. If it is the tenth time you read about the same object you become either curious about this artefact or bored. This can be understood as an affective emergence. An artefact that did not seem of particular interest while being in the field might emerge as a key object due to the interactions of researcher and documentation. Third, and strongly connected with the last point, I would argue that it is again a sensing of a research object which guides the researcher. The researcher tries to tease something out of the description. At the same time it is not only about letting the research object speak, giving it a platform to emerge, but it is also about the ways an object can be listened to. The researcher has to test her interpretations. Therefore she is connecting herself and she gets connected to the field protocol, hooked by an emotive state of interestedness, which guides her towards further research objects. Such operations of “sensing” interesting data, I would say, can not be conceptualised sufficiently as propositional knowledge. Rather the interpretation points to a kind of emotive reflexivity and affective attunement as an important part of the research process. However, the identification of the research object from the protocols is tested by the researcher herself as well as in colloquia or small research groups and thereby gets more and more stabilised and consciously worked on.

**Conclusion**

This small contribution argued that affects and emotions intervene in the process of finding research objects. All the way from the moment we try to get access to the field to the process of homing in on artefacts at the researcher’s desk, the de-subjective neutrality of the scientist is supplemented or even substituted by a strong emotional and affective involvement. Sometimes one wades in the knee-deep mud of the empirical world, sometimes one feels anxiety and anger, sometimes fun and confidence prevail, sometimes it is necessary to allow oneself to be a feeling and sensing being in order to permeate situations of interest. I concentrated on three different entanglements of scientific interest, affect and emotions in the process of identifying research objects, although there are certainly more. They directed my attention towards objects like the copy test, they helped to actively comprehend practices like generating and identifying ‘good ideas’ and they guided the process of retrieving different elements for interpretations of my observations from the field. Accordingly, emotions and affects should not only be treated as research topics but as analytical resources and techniques of attunement.
To feel differently and to sense affective resistance or exhilaration can function as an effective indicator for the researcher to understand and describe her field of interest.

REFERENCES

[1] This account is no exception. Failing in writing about failure can actually only be read in its non-existence. This happened to me once, when an article proposal on the topic of failure and resistance was rejected in the peer-reviewing process. Looking back, I should have published at least the rejection.


[9] At first sight it doesn’t help to replace one slippery term by another one, but after giving it a second thought it did, because “sensing” rather points to a process of the present, while the notion of experience more often refers to the past as a growing pile of sedimented layers.


[12] Writing emotional diaries parallel to the normal field notes and protocols could be a way to reflect the meaning of emotions and affects within the research process; see Stodulka 2015 op.cit.

expanded to the practice of the fieldwork itself; cf. for an exception an article by Stefan Hirschauer: „Putting Things Into Words. Ethnographic Description and the Silence of the Social“. *Human Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006), 413-441.