

# Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

## 4.2 Ambivalence

# What is ambivalence?

- >> Love and hate.
- >> Affection and hostility (classic European ambivalence).
- >> Nurturance vs risk of abandonment (Laos case described by High).
- >> Mixed attachment.

# Ambivalence has many functions

- >> Ambivalence can keep people together or tear them apart.
- >> Ambivalence can be a healthy response to normally mixed feelings.
- >> Ambivalence can also block you from having self-consciousness about bad situations.

I have to say I'm ambivalent about ambivalence.

Write about something you did in  
spite of having mixed feelings  
about it.

Describe the feelings as carefully as possible.

Where does ambivalence come  
from?

# Why ambivalence? In childhood...

*During an infant's long dependence on caregivers, the satisfaction of needs gives rise to affection but also hostility toward the caregiver because of his or her occasional absence or denial of care. Competitors for the caregiver's attention—such as siblings and other adults—also become the objects of ambivalent feelings of affection and hostility. Freud suggested that this ambivalence is present even in overtly affectionate relationships: Indeed, the greater the solicitousness, the greater the hostility because overt and self-conscious declarations of affection are, in fact, attempts to “shout down” the inevitable accompanying hostility. (High 217)*

# Why ambivalence? In fieldwork...

*She looked after me, took care of that pesky question of what to eat each day and how I was to survive in a material context so very different from my own. It was she who taught me how to use an oil lamp made from an old sweetened condensed milk tin. It was she who showed me how to use alum to make the silty Mekong water settle before boiling it to drink. She patiently showed me how to light a charcoal fire using that delicious-smelling resin, how to regulate the heat by adding and removing the coals, and how to steam the sticky rice— all this before finally taking over, saying that I was too wasteful of water, rice, charcoal, and other resources and that she would simply cook for me. That way, she said, I could do my work. She understood my work as few others did. She sat with me as I translated documents in the heat of the day, quizzed me when I returned from marathon meetings, and filtered village gossip through to me so that I was never too much in the dark. And she knew I hated being in the dark. (220)*



*And lest you think that ours was an easy, satisfying relationship, let me be clear: I loved her but with the kind of love that Piers Vitebsky has described as “not so much an emotion itself, [but] as the enabler for a gamut of feelings which may include anger, resentment, and guilt as much as tenderness” (2008:200).*

*Entanglement is perhaps a better word for it. Often, her watchfulness over me, her insistence on caring and providing for me, produced a sense of intense oppressiveness. I found myself avoiding her company at times when I lived on the island, feeling somehow smothered. I felt that the bonds of care and affection were the bonds of unfreedom too. (220)*

# Why ambivalence? In politics...

*No, it is not blood pressure, it is psychological pressure. I am one of those people who do not cry if ‘they feel stressed. I just keep it inside, even if one of my children makes me angry, I keep it inside. There is no one to talk with, so you get to a point where you can’t keep things inside anymore. Then it will show as disease. Most of the time I have headaches, and I feel fatigue all over my body. It is painful. Speaking about myself—I postpone everything, and it is not about having or not having time. For instance, I needed a shirt this month, but I will postpone it until a time when I can’t find anything to wear . . . this is my life. A lot of people say that I’m a strong woman: ‘God be with you, I don’t know how you could pull it all together.’ I feel that this is my life now and I’ve got used to it. (Segal 475–476)*

*Melancholia can help us understand Suhaad's predicament. Her mood, of sadness, resignation, and being under pressure, takes the shape of ambivalence toward the future. **This feeling of ambivalence is fueled by the impossibility of letting go of the attachment to the ideal that a struggle for freedom from the occupation may actually bring about a Palestinian state. Rather than being an object external to her, this attachment becomes inseparable from her sense of self. (Segal 477)***

# Melancholia (a.k.a. depression)

*The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.*

— Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (165)

Melancholia is not just a matter of individual psychology. It happens to whole groups of people according to culturally given parameters.

Ambivalence is largely about how people accept things incoherently, and beyond conscious recognition.

In that sense it is quite different than ideological interpellation (*tiens, un nègre*, as Fanon recounts).