The temporalities of (studying) feeling and display rules – an anthropological perspective

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Drawing on an extended case study from my long-term research on the coming of age of street-related adolescents in the Javanese city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, this paper highlights three intertwined temporalities related to the research of the emergence and transformation of feeling and display rules: first, the maturing actors’ alteration of their bodies and related changing social and cultural role ascriptions over their life course; second, the social changes occurring in the actors’ environments, a rather slow but steady transformation of a place’s architectures, cultural values, beliefs, and norms. I argue that feeling and display rules are best studied in a long-term (life course) perspective that centers on how cultural beliefs and social norms are embodied and negotiated in the interaction between actors of differing social and ‘emotional positions’. The dynamic and interactive disposition of the phenomena studied (feeling and display rules) and the understanding of the epistemology that scientifically attends to these (ethnographic fieldwork and more broadly speaking most qualitative research approaches) as encounters between people within particular social spaces, requires the inclusion of a third temporal dimension: the researcher’s position as it relates to the longitudinal study of those he encounters, observes, talks and listens to (Stodulka 2015).

So far, anthropologists have defined what I shall describe as ‘emotional positions’ as ‘subjectivity’ (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007) or ‘positionality’ (Rosaldo 1989), marginalizing emotions as object of study (Beatty 2013), epistemological category, and relational ethnographic data (Davies and Spencer 2010). The paper adds to (1) trailblazing studies on feeling and display rules (von Scheve 2014), and (2) thriving debates on the socio-cultural construction and affective dimensions of academic knowledge production (Barbalet 2004; Favret-Saada 2012).

The research underlying this presentation is based on an ongoing longitudinal ethnographic study (2001–2015) of the coming of age of street-related adolescents (now young men). Research methods include collaborative action research and actor-centered ethnography based on life story interviews and the systematic exploration of extended case studies. The study is grounded in four years of participant observation and part-time co-habitation with two street communities.