3 Affective assemblages

Atmospheres and therapeutic knowledge production in/through the researcher-body

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‘We did something in a different manner, and the whole atmosphere changed’. Thus concluded one of the speakers at a relationship enhancement seminar after having encouraged participants to shake hands with somebody previously unknown to them and to thank them for being there. However, although experts in (or organisers of) relationship and sex counselling occasionally address the importance of sustaining a sound atmosphere at home in order to maintain a good couple relationship, it is relatively rare to hear them comment on the atmosphere of an ongoing event. Graham¹ was an exception with his comment about the relationship enhancement seminar. He was one of the experts who spoke at the seminar, and he invested a great deal in activating his audience, using various means from urging couples to hug to making people jump up and down. These efforts seemed to aim for the co-production – intensively performed by both Graham and his participants – of an affective atmosphere, which speaks to his recognition that an appropriate atmosphere was essential to the organisation of a successful relationship enhancement seminar. It also highlights how atmospheres, although individually felt, belong to collective situations and reach beyond individual, autonomous subjects (Anderson, 2009; Seyfert, 2012). Whether acknowledged or not, atmospheres are a significant part of human experience. In what follows, I propose that affective atmospheres are important for understanding therapeutic cultures, especially in collective events that concentrate on relationship and sexual issues.

This chapter engages with the issue of affective atmospheres in therapeutic cultures by drawing upon a detailed study of relationship and sex counselling in Finland. I first became interested in atmospheres because of the ambivalences I encountered during my on-site participant observations as a feminist scholar. During those observations, I from time to time found the relationship or sex advice being given at some events personally or professionally problematic but this did not necessarily prevent me from experiencing the atmospheres of the events in question as warm, entertaining or safe. For instance, I encountered disruptive moments because of a firm reliance on gendered stereotypes, such as the idea that men are sexually active and women sexually passive, or a persistent renewal of heteronormative values, such as the equation of intimate relationships with heterosexual marriage (see Kolehmainen, 2018). I have also had an academic interest

in the study of atmospheres and moods since working on a research project on affective inequalities in intimate relationships, which aimed to develop and work with methodologies that provide better access to affect as an embodied experience (see Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018).² I assumed that by paying attention to my own bodily states, I might be able to better work with affect in its embodied form. Here I seek to elaborate on these ambivalences by analysing them and other personal experiences of atmospheres during fieldwork, thereby giving them status within the affective processes of knowledge production.

The theoretical premises of this chapter are rooted in assemblage theory, which highlights the connectivities between objects and bodies. Assemblage theory is a way of mapping how things come together and what the assembled relations enable to become or block from becoming (Ringrose and Renold, 2014: 774; De Landa, 2006). As I focus on a certain kind of assemblage – that of an atmosphere – the concept of affect is fruitful for mapping how different objects and bodies come together in situated experiences of registering, engineering or sustaining an atmosphere. The concept of affect offers a means to explore relations between different kinds of bodies – human, non-human, organic, non-organic, artificial and imaginary (e.g. Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018; Lahti, 2018; Seyfert, 2012) – that play an essential role in affective atmospheres. Further, affect foregrounds bodies' capacities to affect and become affected (see also Deleuze and Guattari, 2004; Massumi, 2004). Indeed, it is bodily in/capacities that make atmospheres possible in the first place. Hence, rather than being located within individual human bodies, the processes of affecting and becoming affected emerge in and through encounters between bodies and things (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018). The fact that we are capable of sensing an atmosphere indicates that we become affected by other bodies. However, we also contribute to the affecting of other bodies, no matter whether this is through conscious effort or not.

Focusing on affective atmospheres, this chapter attempts to move away from human-centred notions of the therapeutic which manifest themselves, for instance, in a reliance on the concept of the self. Previously, the self has been placed at the core of the analysis of therapeutic cultures, which promote an orientation towards the self and employ psychological discourses as resources for selfhood (Furedi, 2006; Illouz, 2008; Madsen and Ytre-Arne, 2012). The growth of therapeutic cultures has further been linked to the cultural tendency towards individualisation, which gives prominence to lifestyle gurus and personal advisers, who act as the new cultural intermediaries of the self (McRobbie, 2009; Wood and Skeggs, 2004). This has been seen as overlapping with neoliberal tendencies, which emphasise the ability to self-monitor, self-regulate, self-diagnose, make choices and transform oneself (e.g. Oullette and Wilson, 2011; Swan, 2008). While these perspectives have captured several essential features of contemporary Western society and its inclination towards the psychologisation of everyday life, therapeutic cultures nevertheless entail elements that are not best grasped by this kind of framework. In this chapter I approach atmospheres from the perspective of new materialist ontology, which shifts the focus of analysis from the feelings of individualised subjects to impersonal flows of

affect through assemblages (see Youdell and Armstrong, 2011: 145). In particular, I mobilise a non-human-centred concept of atmosphere that does not start with an 'I' but invites us to pay attention to the transpersonal, the intercorporeal and the more-than-only-human. The chapter aims to use the lens of affective atmospheres to map how situational and material therapeutic practices operate in/through both human and non-human bodies.

Feeling (with) the field: ethnography in the study of affective atmospheres

In what follows, I will use my own embodied sensations and affective experiences to analyse the experiences of soaking up atmospheres, moving in/out of affective atmospheres, feeling the limits of collective belonging, and failing to 'get' the atmosphere when conducting fieldwork. However, rather than understanding my orientation as a form of autoethnography, I see it as an attempt to open up new insights into relations within assemblages, as my ultimate interest is not in the self. Yet even though atmospheres are best understood from a relational perspective that does not privilege the human subject, they cannot be academically addressed without some sort of rooting in the human body. As Robert Seyfert (2012) points out, affects are conventionally seen as located within an individual subject or body, or else they are seen as atmospheric forces that operate externally to the body. On the one hand, if we believe that affects are individual, we fail to account for their collective and trans-subjective nature. On the other, if we think that people are simply caught by atmospheres, we risk seeing individuals as passive objects with very little agency. Nor do conceptualisations of this kind explain why different people can experience the 'same' atmosphere in different ways – not every individual body is always affected in the same way. The way forwards, then, is to think of affect as the effect of the interactions and encounters of individual human and non-human bodies (*ibid.*). Of course, some definitions of atmosphere (such as 'transpersonal intensity' or 'the transmission of the other's feeling') emphasise human presence, whereas others (such as 'a sense of place or environment') put more weight on non-human actors or elements. However, atmospheres should be seen neither as residing outside human bodies nor as simply human-made.

For the purposes of this chapter, I draw upon my study on relationship and sex counselling practices in Finland. I consider my study as an affective ethnography, a term which refers to the style of research rather than to a mechanistic method (see Gherardi, 2018). In particular, I focus on analysing my fieldwork notes from 40 events (2015–2017) that ranged from relationship enhancement seminars to a tantric workshop and from events catering to the recently separated to variously themed lectures by experts. These events were collective, public or semi-public occasions whose venues ranged from public libraries to fairs and from religious gatherings to hotel facilities. The events I attended varied a great deal: some were organised by national organisations and employed counselling professionals from psychotherapists to certified couple counsellors as experts; others were part of

spiritual, religious or commercial activities and often relied on lay experts. Several events catered to couples who wished to nurture their relationships; others, for instance, targeted those who were recently separated, those who were interested in well-being in general, or those who worked with relationship or sexual issues in their day-to-day professions. It was common to all the events that they did not address particular issues faced by single clients or specific couples, in contrast to private counselling sessions. This conforms to a wider shift in widespread therapeutic cultures: it is no longer just 'sick' selves but also 'healthy' selves who are addressed as potential clients or customers (Ouellette and Wilson, 2011; Swan, 2008). In relationship and sex counselling, this is manifested in the shift from divorce prevention to the nurture and care of relationships (Maksimainen, 2014), which makes it possible to address collectives and groups – and further facilitates atmosphere as a part of therapeutic culture.

Affective ethnography is especially suitable for the exploration of affective atmospheres, as it allows using affect as a resource – enacted through the researcher's embodiment – in the research practice (Gherardi, 2018). Moreover, participant observation allows the researcher to sense, experience and read atmospheres on-site. Social-scientific studies on atmospheres have been relatively scarce, and exploring atmospheres poses a huge challenge to social-scientific enquiry, as atmospheres are often fleeting and barely perceptible (Bille et al., 2015). Of course, from a methodological point of view, the task of investigating atmospheres (or perhaps, investigating *with(in) them*) is challenging. However, participant observation allows us to shift the locus of knowledge production from after-the-event narratives to 'the social as it happens', in a way that makes it possible to explore the atmospheres themselves rather than their descriptions. Atmospheres cannot be felt in retrospect, so they need to become registered in the field. Feeling (with) the field shifts the focus from ethnographic 'knowing' to relating and experiencing, thereby departing from the dissociated and objectifying gaze of the knower in modern science (see Bryld and Lykke, 2000; Coleman and Ringrose, 2013; Law, 2004; Stewart, 2017). Atmospheres can become 'known' through the personal sensation of feeling them, rather than through the distanced gaze of a researcher. Hence, the study of atmospheres makes it evident that researchers are always already part of the assemblages they seek to study (e.g. Fox and Alldred, 2015: 400, 2017: 20). Since there is no binary between a bodiless atmosphere and a body (Seyfert, 2012), the researcher is never outside an atmosphere, regardless of how they feel or whether they register the atmosphere. Hence, to explore atmospheres is to reject binaries of subject/object, researcher/researched and knower/known in a very concrete way.

In practice, I have chosen to experiment by using my own researcher-body as a site of research, as a means to address affective atmospheres. As Lisa Blackman (2015) writes, affect is disclosed in atmospheres. However, affect is not an entity that can be captured as an *it* or a thing; thus, no method can straightforwardly prove or provide evidence for what affect is (*ibid.*). The methodological question then remains: how can we work methodologically with the concept of affect and actually 'operationalise' it to find ways of understanding how affect works in the social

(Ringrose and Renold, 2014: 773)? One way affect works in the social is through atmospheres: atmospheres highlight how affect operates on us in divergent ways, rather than being external to human subjects (Colebrook, 2002: 39; Seyfert, 2012). In order to analyse such operations, I have integrated my own researcher-body into the research practice. By using my own researcher-body as a site of research, I have been able to produce embodied-affective data (see also Knudsen and Stage, 2015). Embodied-affective data refers to data that foregrounds the embodied experiences of affecting and being affected. It is indexically linked to the bodies ‘in’ affect – the researcher and participants (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen, 2019; Knudsen and Stage, 2015; Walkerdine, 2010). Here, embodied-affective data refers to data that is produced by my researcher-body as the latter is affected by atmospheres – and of course also affects them through my on-site participation. My reflections of having a body ‘in’ affect do not, of course, limit themselves to conscious reflections or fieldwork notes. However, I rely here on my fieldwork notes, which document affects in several ways, from accounts of personal feelings to sensing shifts in atmosphere, and from shifts in textual styles to reflections regarding affects and the interpretations given to them by experts, participants or me.

When bodies are conceptualised as trans-subjective, intercorporeal and capable of both affecting and being affected by other bodies – rather than as singular, autonomous and human-only – the exploration of a researcher-body may help to produce knowledge of affective relations within and of assemblages, rather than of subjective experiences. In this way, foregrounding a researcher-body is not a means to re-centre ‘I’ or human subjectivity, but is one way of providing an alternative viewpoint from which to consider situatedness within assemblages (see also Fox and Alldred, 2015: 409). Indeed, affects are not a lens onto ‘truth’ or reality, and this also holds true when we consider the researcher’s bodily states (see also Hemmings, 2012; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012). Researchers have different capacities for ‘reading’ atmospheres, as indicated in instances when researchers guess wrongly what other people are feeling or are otherwise incompetent in interpreting how other people experience atmospheres (see Wetherell, 2012: 146). Different bodies can also become affected in different ways in the same situation (Seyfert, 2012). Hence, I also attempt here to implicate myself (as a researcher) within the research process and to analytically explore my own affective investments in the subject under investigation (see Blackman, 2015: 25–26). Taking situatedness within assemblages into account opens up possibilities for exploring the power relations inherent to atmospheres. From the perspective of situatedness, then, it becomes possible to attune to how social inclusion and exclusion become orchestrated through atmospheres (Bille et al., 2015: 36), and how these processes get entangled with social differences, among other issues.

Creating an affective atmosphere: on collective belonging

The first occasion when I paid attention to atmosphere was right at the beginning of my study when I attended a tantric workshop, not quite knowing what to expect (see also Kolehmainen, 2018). When I heard that the workshop entailed active

participation, including the task of touching strangers, I felt a little reserved. Still, I soon found myself dancing to the rhythm of the music and giving hugs to other attendees. To my surprise, it was rather fun, and I soon started to find the atmosphere humorous and relaxed:

The tutor says that we can read in books what tantra is and explore self-help guides; however, now we are going to do things and get out of our comfort zones – she tells us how we are going to proceed, how we are going to touch ourselves and other people (oh no! don't want to!) and how different music is going to affect us.

Then we dance. The atmosphere is relaxed, unconstrained and jolly. (Field notes: tantric workshop, 2015)

As I recall the event, the production of a certain kind of atmosphere was key. It appears as if attending the workshop and soaking up a certain kind of atmosphere would be meaningful in their own right, instead of getting straightforward advice or focusing on intentional self-transformation. However, the atmosphere was not there waiting for participants to enter and feel it (see Wetherell, 2012). Rather, the instructor – a woman named Lily – pulled the right strings again and again: she was energetic and actively activated us. She had chosen a playlist and the workshop design made us participants mingle. At first, we started walking hand in hand. At that point Lily commented 'I can see that our auras are uniting', which can be seen as indicating an attempt to create a collective mood. This was followed by some hugging and dancing. In other words, the atmosphere was created step by step, starting with relatively mundane activities that were followed by increasing contact and proximity between bodies. We can see how the (actual, desired or imagined) atmosphere was intensified through the creation of patterns of affective imitation and the mobilisation of several senses: in addition to the movement, there was the music, the touching, the eye contact.

I was caught in the atmosphere most of the time, until the instructor started to talk about how women should not feel ashamed when men looked at their 'boobs and bottoms'. I felt irritated by her words, and my irritation articulated a rupture in the atmosphere as I felt it and resulted in a moment of feeling temporarily out of place. In any case, I could not help finding Lily's words problematic, and thus rather than soaking up the collective atmosphere, I became aware of my position as a feminist (scholar) and adopted an evaluative stance towards the way the workshop was now being conducted:

The first group is assigned a task to dance in a sexy way. The second group is assigned to look at the first group dancing. My first reaction is irritation, I immediately think this is a way to teach women how to become objects of the male gaze. Nevertheless, my irritation does not rule out the return of good vibes. [...] A woman seeks intense eye contact with me and dances in a flirtatious way in front of me. (Field notes: tantric workshop, 2015)

This example also demonstrates how atmospheres are ‘regulated’ by moving (individual or collective) bodies and by organising the practices of proximity/distance. During the workshop, the attendees were actively made into a collective, as our personal boundaries were somewhat blurred by our being made to move in the space and make contact with others. However, when we were divided into two groups, the instructor’s words now suggested the emergence of gendered and sexualised bodies rather than of an atmospheric collective, in contrast to the beginning when she had talked about uniting auras. Of course, we were still groups of ‘women’ and ‘men’ (despite the fact that these two groups were not formed in terms of ‘being’ any particular gender but rather of ‘performing’). If atmospheres are invoked by environments that ‘prime and cook affect’ so as to prepare and induce bodies to perform in certain ways (Thrift, 2009: 88), we might think that here the bodies were quite literally being made to perform in certain ways, from activities such as hugging to gendering and sexualising processes.

However, the good vibes did return, and later the experience of attending this workshop inspired me to rethink the reasons why people invest in certain therapeutic events. For instance, despite the framework which stressed heterosexuality and binary gender roles, a ‘queer’ situation in which a woman approached me in a flirtatious way still took place (see also Kolehmainen, 2018). This in turn made me ponder to what extent people ‘consume’ experiences, atmospheres included, rather than advice, for example. Perhaps the workshop points to the ways in which collective experiences can be experienced *as* therapeutic in themselves, as they may provide welcome feelings or offer a means of social bonding, for instance. It would be reasonable to assume that people look for affective experiences when attending collective forms of the therapeutic realm such as the various events described in this chapter. Indeed, the experience of affect – rather than specific products – has become an important selling point in Western societies (Skeggs, 2005: 971), and this kind of experience is surely part of the allure of forms of therapeutic culture that are about collective events and favour the emergence of affective atmospheres.

Soaking up an atmosphere: atmospheres as therapeutic

Another example of getting caught in the atmosphere comes from an event that was very different from the tantric workshop, as it addressed separation and featured ‘experts by experience’ as its speakers. Of course, as a sensitive theme, separation is different from the playful tantric workshop. Atmospheres are about norms – about what *should* be felt (Bille et al., 2015) – and appropriate atmospheres differ in different situations such as these two events. Nevertheless, it is still possible to acknowledge here that the intimate atmosphere was intensified through various means and that it caught me despite the way I felt at the beginning of the event. On the morning of that day I had heard about the sudden death of a friend and long-term colleague, and I was saddened by the news. I had made plans to participate in the event, but I really did not feel like going after receiving this news. However, I had been in contact with the organisers beforehand and

felt obliged to show up. I still remember the feeling of not wanting to go there. Perhaps not surprisingly, at first I felt out of place and irritated:

Feeling irritated. [–] My head is congested and a little achy. (Field notes: event targeted at parents who are divorced or separated, 2016)

My remarks in my field notes are quite sour. I made critical comments about how the organisers presented their organisation and related activities, such as ‘they just advertise their own organisation all the time’, and as demonstrated above, I was not feeling well. However, I started to forget my frustration when the first lay expert shared their personal story. When the next experts by experience started to talk, I became so caught in the atmosphere that it felt inappropriate to make notes, and this highlights the challenges the study of atmospheres can pose for a researcher. It might feel intimidating to observe or make notes, as is demonstrated in the following example, a situation where Miriam (a mother) and Jenny (her daughter) gave a talk on divorce:

Mother and daughter [–] are already in front (of us). They sit in armchairs next to each other; the chairs are closer to the audience than before the break. The situation is intimate, so I make hardly any notes but just write things down in retrospect from memory. (Field notes: event targeted at parents who are divorced or separated, 2016)

There were elements which created a sense of intimacy, such as the impression of confidential openness. Miriam and Jenny spoke about their personal experiences of divorce, Miriam from the perspective of a recent divorcee and Jenny from the perspective of a daughter of divorced parents. Miriam mentioned a few times in passing that she was ‘certain that the right people are here’. In so doing, she actively addressed us as friends, allies or confidants. Atmospheres (also) come to matter through discourse (see Bille et al., 2015: 36), and the references to the ‘right people’ addressed the audience as a collective in a positive light. Hence, Miriam strongly contributed to the manufacturing of an intimate and warm atmosphere. Both physical and psychological proximity were created as Miriam seemed to talk as if the audience were full of close friends and acquaintances, and she was fairly close to the listeners, as remarked in my field notes. All these elements produced the impression of authenticity, which perhaps made the speakers appear ‘genuine’ people – and genuineness and authenticity are desired features in the assessment of atmospheres (see Bille et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Miriam and Jenny were sitting in armchairs – furniture usually found in living rooms or other cosy environments – which contributed to the making of a certain kind of atmosphere. Practices from interior design, landscape gardening and architecture, such as arranging light and sound, circumscribe atmospheres (Anderson, 2009). Here the armchairs undermined any obvious traces of authority, reaching beyond dichotomies of speaker/listener and expert/layperson. Furthermore, Miriam and Jenny sat next to each other and obviously had a close relationship, as they were able to talk about intimate

family issues openly as mother and child. Unlike many of the expert speakers at the events I attended, they did not make a PowerPoint presentation, which further contributed to the unmaking of the distance between them and their audience. Although Miriam browsed her phone at least once in order to check the topics they had planned to speak about, all the self-evident symbols of a formal presentation were absent.

However, even though organisers and speakers engineer atmospheres in many ways, they themselves may also become affected by the atmosphere. In this case, Miriam and her husband had divorced less than a year before, after a long marriage, and Miriam was visibly moved, as I could see tears in her eyes. This highlights how bodies are located in a circuit of feeling and response (Hemmings, 2005: 551), capable of both being affected and affecting other bodies. The tears indicated a body 'in affect', being already affected – yet they also continued to affect other bodies and to produce a certain kind of atmosphere. Also, the way in which Miriam addressed 'the right people' can be seen as an indicator that atmosphere was important for her, raising the issue of how atmospheres matter not only from the perspective of participants but also from the perspective of experts. Even though Miriam and Jenny's personal motives were not known, the question of whether it is personally rewarding for lay experts to share their insights is still relevant.

Bodily in/capacities: limits of collective belonging?

Although I was very much caught in the intimate atmosphere described above, I faced the limits of collective belonging at another event targeting the divorced or separated. At the latter event there were two couple therapists acting as experts. It emerged from the questions posed to the therapists that there were people at this event who had just undergone break-ups and who were in great pain. I noticed that I too felt a little sad and occasionally had tears in my eyes. I cannot know whether this was due to some sort of affective resonance among us all, or my embodied attempts to fit in, or my being touched by the therapists' talk. However, when we moved on to a breathing practice, I noticed that my embodied experience was different compared with that of the participants who were undergoing a break-up process:

We all stand up. One of the therapists jokingly says that we do not have to touch each other or anything like that. She says this is similar to a mindfulness or yoga exercise, not exactly like either of them, but this exercise borrows elements from that kind of practice. We close our eyes and breathe deeply. The situation reminds me of yoga and my breathing is effortless. [–] I am slightly amused by the fact that this mindfulness and belief in breathing and the like, this is now so widespread that even therapists rely on it. However, when the therapist asks us how we felt, a woman in front of me replies – to my surprise, perhaps – that a pressing feeling had emerged around her chest or neck, and another woman echoes her. I understand that those of us who are recently divorced or separated felt in a different way than I did,

and that their breathing wasn't as easy as mine. (Field notes: event targeted at the divorced or separated, 2016)

Despite the way I interpreted the situation in my field notes, I cannot know for sure how the actual embodied responses differed, or whether my own experience was really shaped by my not being in the midst of a separation project (perhaps it was about my association with yoga practice, which does not have much to do with the arrangement of intimate relationships). In any case, I remained unmarked by a pressing feeling. Affects can both draw us together and force us apart, and can signal a lack of any intersubjective connection (Hemmings, 2012; Juvonen and Kolehmainen, 2016; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010); here my lack of a certain embodied feeling appeared to mark the limits of shared mood or atmosphere. It was not about different meanings given to our breathing or to our embodied responses; our bodies became affected in different ways in this situation.

Further, this example illustrates how a body's in/capacities to affect and to become affected are the result of relations – not only of relations here and now, but also of past relations and relations to the past. I was able to relate to embodied feelings of break-up pain through my past experiences, but I remained untouched by any pressing feeling. In this way, my personal history became part of the affective assemblage and knowledge production, highlighting the temporal dimensions of affective assemblages and how they are constantly in flux. The affective relations within an assemblage may also comprise traces of the past and should not be understood in ways that exclude embodied, psychic and intangible experiences. This example also shows that human accounts – field notes included – can tell us about situatedness within assemblages rather than about individual reactions (see also Youdell and Armstrong, 2011: 145; Fox and Alldred, 2015: 409). The differences in bodily states indicate that the human bodies that participated in the breathing exercise were situated differently in the assemblage. Further, this exemplifies how similarities and differences are made, unmade and remade through affective atmospheres. Rather than seeing difference/similarity as a question of predefined, fixed and stable subject positions, we can understand difference and similarity as temporal products of shifting relations.

However, regardless of the differences in how I and some other people felt, I was still a part of the production of a situational affective atmosphere, doing the breathing exercise and trying to comply. Especially as this was an event that focused on separation, it felt ethically sound and respectful to those undergoing the process of separation to sense the atmosphere and be wary of causing any discomfort. My fieldwork indeed points to the myriad ways in which researchers participate in the co-production of atmospheres, from participating in activities that are designed to engineer a certain kind of atmosphere to simply being present.

Failing to feel it: on attempts to manipulate affect

On some other occasions when the atmosphere has not caught me, I have associated my not soaking it up with the way the particular event has been organised. For instance, while attending a seminar on well-being which also addressed

relationships and sexuality, I became awkwardly aware of the commercial aspect of the event. There were two keynote speakers, introduced by a host – a man named Larry – whose presentation did not feel ‘natural’ to me, one reason for this being his use of language that I interpreted as being (overly) formal. Larry also introduced the two speakers, who entered the stage and started to discuss and debate different topics linked to the theme. However, I soon started to get the impression that the situation was highly scripted:

Their lines sound memorised and play-acted. Somehow this situation feels pretty lame. (Field notes: seminar on well-being, 2017)

This experience offers an example of the ways in which ‘authentic’ and ‘genuine’ atmospheres are valued. Atmosphere is often thought of as being about something genuine or authentic, in contrast to staging, which is seen as artificial or simulated – even though people’s experiences of environments are actually manipulated in many ways (Bille et al., 2015). Here my ‘lame’ feelings stemmed from a judgement concerning what I assumed was a staged situation, since the debate did not sound like a real debate but rather like a well-rehearsed play. Whereas the examples discussed above of getting caught in atmospheres point to intimacy, closeness and proximity, here the apparent staging highlighted the distance and hierarchy between the speakers and the audience and worked to distract me.

Further, this seminar is an example of how affective labour is invested in creating atmospheres. Whereas earlier capitalist production processes were connected to the production of material objects, contemporary commodities increasingly take the form of information, services, care, communication and affect, which all play central roles in new forms of labour (Hardt, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2005; Lazzarato, 2004). In other words, the creation and manipulation of affects are forms of immaterial labour (Hardt, 1999), and this is what human investments in creating atmospheres are all about. Nevertheless, engineering atmospheres is an essential form of capitalisation upon affects. From the perspective of affective labour, then, it seems that affective labour which becomes ‘too’ visible produces the effect of inauthenticity, which in turn makes the situation appear staged. It was perhaps too obvious that the organisers had made preparations to produce an entertaining event, and their labour was ‘revealed’ as if they were trying to manipulate an atmosphere too forcefully.

My interpretation of the situation resulted in a distanced evaluation, which perhaps also made it challenging for me to let my body become affected. This illustrates how analysis emerges over time, and not only after fieldwork: before research begins, during live research encounters, and afterwards (Ringrose and Renold, 2014). Here my interpretation of the atmosphere at the time itself became an important part of the experience, which emphasises how atmospheres also challenge the dichotomy of experience/interpretation. It is essential to understand that atmospheres work in/through us, and this highlights that data can be viewed as alive – as active matter with which researchers may engage in open-ended ways (MacLure, 2013; Dernikos, 2018), even though data is often mistakenly regarded as stable, passive and raw (see also St Pierre et al., 2016). Even though

my analysis has centred on the ways organisers and experts invest in creating atmospheres by various means, such as by organising practices of proximity/distance and intimacy/detachment, atmospheres cannot be reduced to being human-made, and nor can they be endlessly manipulated, as experiences of failing to get caught in an atmosphere indicate.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have engaged with the issue of affective atmospheres in therapeutic engagements by drawing upon a study of relationship and sex counselling in Finland. Using my own researcher-body as a site of research, I analysed the experiences of soaking up atmospheres, moving in/out of affective atmospheres, feeling the limits of collective belonging, and failing to ‘get’ the atmosphere when conducting fieldwork at various events. By drawing upon assemblage theory and new materialist ontology, I have proposed that the exploration of atmospheres offers novel insights into therapeutic cultures, as it makes it possible to move away from human-centred notions of the therapeutic, such as the preoccupation with the self. Affective atmospheres stress how situational and material therapeutic practices operate in/through both human and non-human bodies. Further, therapeutics in itself can be seen as an ever-becoming, vital assemblage of a variety of situational and material practices, objects and things – an aspect that has been much ignored in previous studies. In the majority of studies on therapeutics, the focus has been on top-down approaches which stress how therapeutic discourses are mobilised to govern populations (Salmenniemi, 2017; Kolehmainen, 2018). Approaches of this kind do not acknowledge the lived, networked, relational and embodied experiences that therapeutics are about. The investigation of atmospheres shifts the focus from the self to the collective, from advice-giving to experience, and from governmentality to lived experience.

Therapeutic cultures have been criticised for severing the self from communal relations and fostering an atomistic individualism where the self is cut away from meaningful social and political content (see Illouz, 2008). However, my analysis of affective atmospheres at various events related to relationship and sex counselling speaks to the importance of understanding the therapeutic realm through collective experiences too (see also Perheentupa in this book). The therapeutic ethos does not only manifest itself in the blossoming of psychological discourses as resources for making the self, in the popularity of private counselling sessions, or in the growth of self-help technologies; many kinds of collective or public events also form an essential part of the therapeutic realm. In this way – and even when they employ individualistic discourses – such events also provide concrete arenas for collective experience. To register an atmosphere is to sense a connection, which may feel therapeutic in itself; and to fail to catch it may intensify feelings of non-belonging, rendering one more vulnerable. I hope that future studies will elaborate further on how collective atmospheres contribute to the therapeutic.

Notes

- 1 All the names in this chapter are pseudonyms.
- 2 This work was funded by the Academy of Finland project *Just the two of us? Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships* (grant number 287983).

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