



Compassion as a Social Emotion in Ethnographic Research with Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore compassion both as a social emotion and as a practice of encounter in ethnographic research. I argue that compassion is not a plain emotion but instead a socially relational one that prompts cognitive processes, leading to a desire to help. My focus is on how compassion deepens our understanding of vulnerability, exposure and the ethics of care in migration research. Empirically, this article draws on fieldwork conducted with unaccompanied refugee minors in Finland. I examine how emotionally challenging moments of (be)longing manifest in the lives of these young people and how compassion can be used to interpret their experiences. I propose that compassion comprises three interrelated dimensions: practical, ethical and analytical. I conclude that taking compassion seriously offers a pathway towards more ethically sustainable and caring research practices, particularly when working with vulnerable subjects and communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Several research articles and projects have shed light on the experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors (UMs) in Europe and Nordic countries (e.g. [Elsrud et al. 2025](#); [Herz & Lander 2017](#); [Kauhanen et al. 2022](#); [Kaukko & Wernesjö 2017](#); [Kohli 2006](#); [Korjonen-Kuusipuro & Kuusisto 2019](#); [Korkiamäki & Gilligan 2020](#); [Kuusisto-Arponen 2016a](#); [Kuusisto-Arponen & Gilmartin 2019](#)). These analyses have discussed the everyday challenges that UMs face in their new societies, including problems with institutional housing arrangements, fractured educational paths and a lack of social support mechanisms. Attention has also been paid to young people's own agency and emotional work when forming transcultural ties of belonging, friendships and attempts to create future life, along with many practices of migration control, institutionalised care and prolonged waiting ([Jahanmahan & Trondman 2020](#); [Kohli & Kaukko 2018](#); [Korjonen-Kuusipuro et al. 2019](#); [Lander & Herz 2018](#); [Tørrisplass 2025](#)). Much of this research uses participatory and ethnographic methods and pays close attention to ethical practices (e.g. [Chase et al. 2020](#); [Kauhanen et al. 2022](#); [Kuusisto-Arponen 2016a](#); [Millei et al. 2022](#)). My article extends this literature by proposing compassion as a key methodological practice in encountering these young people in ethnographic research.

Further, as critical and feminist scholars have highlighted there is an urgent need to adopt different onto-epistemic and ethical approaches in migration research ([Hugman et al. 2011](#); [Kaukko et al. 2017](#); [Kuusisto & Korjonen-Kuusipuro 2025](#); [Marucco Al-Mimar 2024](#); [Pascucci 2017](#); [Povinelli 2012](#)). This means that we need to develop ethical, epistemological and methodological approaches to ensure accountability and to conduct critical research with vulnerable communities and individuals. As [Clark-Kazak \(2022\)](#) posits, 'radical care ethics' or 'ethics of care' could provide this much-needed holistic framework for moral and practical considerations in migration research (see also [Held 2006](#); [Hobart & Kneese 2020](#)). She identifies three fundamental principles that underpin the ethics of care. First, it is argued that humans are inherently interdependent in a relational sense. This is also applicable in contexts characterised by unequal power relations, which is often the case in migration-related research. Second, the objective of procedural ethics to minimise or reduce harm is insufficient and inadequate. Instead, the ethics of care requires a proactive approach to the prevention of harm. Third, it is imperative that migration research acknowledges the productive role of emotions. This implies that researchers must begin to critically reflect and analyse issues that they react to and care about emotionally in their research with migrants and their communities ([Clark-Kazak 2022](#): 1153–1154).

In this article, I will respond to these important ethical principles and suggest that taking compassion as a social emotion seriously and using it in ethnographic fieldwork provides a new opening for what ethics of care could be in the praxis of migration research. I do this along with scholarship discussing power relations, the role of positionality in the fieldwork, research ethics and societal accountability in ethnography (e.g. [Boccagni & Baldassar 2015](#); [Chase et al. 2020](#); [Korkiamäki & Kaukko 2023](#); [Marucco Al-Mimar 2024](#); [Olson 2016](#); [Vervliet et al. 2015](#)). Thus, this article will contribute to feminist and critical traditions by tackling questions such as how to interpret embodiment in 'data' collection, how to relate to the participant's narratives of pain and how to analyse the knowledge attained through this kind of exposure ([Clark 2017](#); [Gilmartin et al. 2026](#); [Häkli & Kallio 2021](#); [Olson 2016](#); [Valentine 2008](#)).

Hereby, my aim is to deepen the understanding of how emotionally dense and care-ful relations in the field 'happen' and to provide a frame for critical reflection of these

relational moments by using compassion. I discuss compassion through three interlinked aspects: practical, ethical and analytical. While compassion can be readily understood as a practical way to build interaction and trust, together with the research participant, I argue here that paying attention to compassion as a social emotion brings forward other important ethical and analytical perspectives as well. These include how to sustain the difficult and emotionally challenging moments in the fieldwork; how to live through these moments together; and how to provide integrity, safety and support. Also, throughout the research process, compassion can be seen as a tool to use in analysing, interpreting and writing about this co-created knowledge (see [Maillet et al. 2017](#)).

The fieldwork period of this article took place at the time of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. In 2015, the numbers of arriving asylum-seekers in the European Union peaked at 1.3 million. More than 95,000 UMs claimed asylum in EU countries, as follows: 42,300 (Germany), 35,000 (Sweden) 5,050 (Norway), 3,024 (Finland) and 2,125 (Denmark) ([Nordregio](#); [Migrationsverket 2016](#); [Migri statistics](#)). The Finnish reception system was designed to process about 200 UMs annually. Also, during 2015–2016, several changes to national and supranational migration governance were made in Finland: UMs did not automatically receive a permanent residence permit, deportation procedures were applied to them as well and family re-unification was made extremely difficult ([Kuusisto-Arponen 2016b](#)). These wider political and legal changes in Finland’s asylum regime in part have structured the everyday contexts and conditions in which our project and I found the urgent need for compassionate encountering of these youths.

The empirical data and examples in this article are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with unaccompanied refugee minors in Finland between 2014 and 2017. To gain access to the field, the research team worked together with several schools, housing units, nongovernmental organisations and youth organisations. Research permits were secured from responsible organisations, and entering the field was always negotiated with the youths involved. To this end, we gathered informed consent in written or oral form from each participant. On a few occasions, some young people did not want to take part in the research but still wished to be included in activities, such as art or music workshops that we organised. We wanted to support this social inclusion but did not include these young people into our data. While the fieldwork took place in the everyday settings where young people attended sporadically and inconsistently, the project worked altogether with approximately 60 youths throughout the years. The data consists of field diaries, photos, videos and photo-elicited interviews. At the time of fieldwork, the participants were 14–17 years of age, lived in reception centres designed for minors and were seeking asylum or had fixed-term residence permits in Finland. The majority of these youths were males from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Congo and Somalia.

Next, I will outline the theoretical basis of compassion as a social emotion. Empirically, I demonstrate how compassion as a practical, ethical and analytical lens is used in fieldwork with refugee youths. I conclude by reflecting on what compassion as a social emotion offers to critical research on forced migration.

2. THE POWER OF COMPASSION AS A SOCIAL EMOTION

I argue that compassion is more than just a ‘plain’ emotion: it is socially relational, embodied and involves cognitive processes leading to a desire to help (see [Damasio 2010](#)). To understand how compassion operates in social situations, I will discuss

the multidisciplinary foundations of compassion. My research is firmly located in the field of social sciences, and hence I am careful not to reduce lived encounters to neuropsychological or cognitive science. However, by bringing together two different fields of literature, I hope to provide a solid basis for thinking about and evaluating what compassion as an emotion does in the relational interdependence of human beings and how it can be applied in fieldwork encounters. In social sciences, emotions, affects and compassion have been discussed through concepts such as sociology and geography of emotions and politics of compassion (e.g. [Hast 2014](#); [Smith et al. 2009](#); [Turner 2009](#); [Ure & Frost 2014](#); [Wetherell 2012](#)). The focus has been, for example, in social and embodied appearance of emotions; the role of emotions and affects in institutional and systemic change; care and ethics; and politics of compassion as a basis of common humanity and democratic community ([Barnett 2005](#); [Harrison 2008](#); [Puumala 2013](#); [Ure & Frost 2014](#)). Much of my thinking derives from these discussions. In addition, I draw on psychological and neuropsychological research that has explained how compassion is aroused in our brains and what role it has in human communication, the creation of social communities and the moral agency of humans ([Damasio 2010](#); [Goetz et al. 2010](#); [Greenberg & Turksma 2015](#); [Saarela et al. 2007](#)).

The neuroscientist and neurologist [Damasio \(2010: 125\)](#) argues that compassion as a social emotion emerges in various situations and has an important role in the lives of communities. [Damasio \(2010: 125–126\)](#) specifies four key features in the arousal of social emotions. First, it requires an emotive stimulus; second, it depends on certain triggering factors in the brain; third, it occurs in detailed action-generating activities involving the body; and fourth, it is experienced when a person associates the emotion with feelings. Further, the emergence of compassion has been found to be dependent upon the environment where the person has grown up – so, for example, feeling compassion involves cognitive features and the person's previous experiences and memories of life ([Goetz et al. 2010](#)). However, as [Ducey \(2007: 191\)](#) points out, reactions to emotional stimulus are also a result of socialisation and can change over time. These notions make compassion a valuable social emotion in ethnographic research and a tool to focus attention also towards wider systemic injustices.

Compassion is simultaneously a cognitive, embodied and social process. As [Goetz et al. \(2010: 351\)](#) argue, compassion as an emotion appears when a person witnesses another person's suffering and thus wishes to help that person. When people experience compassion, they do not experience the same feelings as they observe or expect the person suffering the pain to feel; instead, they relate to the other person's experience. This affective relationship emerges, according to [Goetz et al. \(2010: 356–358\)](#), on account of three contextual factors: what the other person means for us, how justified we feel the other person's plea for help is and how well we can manage the emotive burden of the situation. Thus, compassion is a process continuously taking shape, comprising various interlinked processes of affectivity, cognition and engaging interest ([Halifax 2012](#)). Cognitive control enables one simultaneously to use memory, regulate emotions and think. These aspects of compassion are important when using it as an onto-epistemological ground in academic research. Compassion includes a bodily dimension in which an experience or a sense of another person's suffering attunes the body and mind of the experiencer to be receptive to emphatic reactions. This means that the compassion felt for another does not lead to a transfer of experiences eliciting compassion but to a contextual and cognitive-moral thinking and action ([Greenberg & Turksma 2015](#); [Halifax 2012: 283](#)).

Compassion as a social emotion is facilitated in face-to-face exposure and differs from other closely related emotions, such as empathy. By 'empathy' here, I mean a

feeling or potential cognitive understanding of how someone else is feeling. Empathy can be used in a range of ways, including manipulation, control and governing of the other, and it does not necessarily lead to action or change in social interaction (e.g. Head 2016; Häkli & Kallio 2021; Spathopoulou et al. 2021). To feel empathetic towards someone does not require direct interaction with that person, whereas, in compassion, the element of proximity is essential. Furthermore, as Hast (2014) aptly remarks, compassionate presence and interactions should not be confused with feeling pity, which involves a completely different set of emotions (see Goetz et al. 2010: 352). Feeling pity means that one holds the other person in a lower regard than oneself. Pity will rarely result in actions taken to help the other person, whereas compassion always includes emotional work and cognitive actions to respect others and respond to contexts that create suffering (see Ure & Frost 2014: 14).

I propose that using compassion in research is one attempt to reconcile critical thinking on suffering body/ies and their relational existence in multiple contexts. This requires acknowledging the risks that might derive from unequal power relations and would, in the worst case, result in depoliticising structural issues. Thus, the epistemological bridge here is the embodied exposure. This exposure *'is about contact which leaves neither party immune to the other's influence'* (Puumala 2013: 126). As the philosopher Levinas argues, the subject is always-already responsible to and for the other (Levinas 1981 in Barnett 2005: 8–9). Therefore, we should accept embodied vulnerability as an inherent condition of human existence and as a lived sensibility of exposure to another, and this ontology should somehow be signalled in our social scientific research frameworks (Harrison 2008: 426).

I argue that compassion as an onto-epistemic approach is based exactly on these premises. Thus, compassion appears out of human vulnerability, which is signified in the relational presence of the self and the other (entities) and in exposure to the other's suffering. Importantly, as Puumala (2013: 125–126) remarks, exposure, submitting to exposure and being exposed to one another's presence can provide an opportunity to build a research relationship that could dispute the stereotypical categories. This notion is crucial in all research settings connecting compassion, vulnerability and responsibility. Thus, compassion can be seen as having practical, ethical and analytical value in submitting to exposure and encountering human vulnerability when facing these social categories, power relations and the accompanying identity positions. Compassion becomes a tool to reach towards other individuals' experiences and to co-create understanding. Here, understanding refers to 'feeling together with action'. In other words, compassionate distress to another person's pain creates a desire to help, and, in the fieldwork, this is an ethical attitude that seeks not only moral evaluation but actions and care through embodied presence. This way, compassion can also foster critical understanding of the lived inequalities it seeks to address.

However, the role of compassion in research conduct should also be viewed critically. I agree with Ure and Frost (2014: 7–9) about the dangers of compassion if it were directly put in practice as the basis of action or political decision-making. This could lead to one-sided descriptions of unfair social practices or, as Konstan (2014) argues, there might be, in some situations, even a kind of pressure to forgive former enemies, who, in fact, have legal and moral responsibilities for their harmful actions (Konstan 2014: 185). To avoid these kinds of responses, one must know when and how (practical, ethical and analytical) to use compassion so that emotional intelligence, as well as the cognitive and normative potentials linked to it, can be harnessed to uncover and correct social and political injustices (see Whitebrook 2014). Once again, this highlights

3. COMPASSION AS PRACTICAL: NEGOTIATING EXPOSURE AND PRESENCE

How compassion is used to negotiate exposure and presence in the field is always relational and context-dependent. While researchers prepare to enter the field, participants are already living it and are often unprepared for the first encounter. Addressing this imbalance requires openness to dialogue, silence and shifting emotions, as well as sensitivity to evolving human-material relationships (Cerwonka & Malkki 2007). Reflexivity about one's positionality and continuous assessment of research practices are central to ethnography and the ethics of care (Clark-Kazak 2022). Formal ethical guidelines also shape early interactions when trust is often contested (Chase et al. 2020; Kauhanen et al. 2022; Kaukko et al. 2019).

Building presence begins with having a nonjudgemental attitude towards all moments and stories shared. These young people are sensitive to the authenticity of adults' interest and test this trust (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016a), requiring researchers to respond compassionately yet professionally. Methodologically, this involves an ongoing emotive-cognitive process in which trust is negotiated across the political, cultural and social contexts meaningful to the youths. Beyond verbal interactions, ethnography attends to embodied emotions and senses (Chase et al. 2020; Pink 2009). Through compassion, engaging interest means not only observing but also living and reflecting together on emotions, affects and embodied experiences. These experiences can vary from placelessness and loneliness to joy, happiness and emerging new ties of belonging.

When negotiating my presence in the housing unit, I had to navigate the evolving social relations and spatial dynamics of a place that was both a home and an institution. I followed three practical principles. First, because the fieldwork took place in the youths' home, I regularly asked how they felt about my presence. To meet procedural ethics requirements, I offered an option for anonymous feedback via a locked post box. It came as no surprise that, during the 7 months I worked there, no messages were left for me. This was not due to excellent research design but rather the reality of 'check-list' type of procedural ethics being poorly related to how field relationships are created and lived (see Clark-Kazak 2022). Instead, the youths responded to me directly. They often invited me to join activities like watching films or cooking and, at times, asked me to leave shared spaces when they wanted privacy with their peers. Navigating these encounters meant respecting boundaries they set. I never knocked on their room doors and spent quiet moments in the kitchen or staff office until someone appeared.

Second, I developed my own ways of being compassionately present and showing interest in what the young people wished to share. While such attunement is typical in ethnography, working with vulnerable minors required sensitivity to care. This meant emotional support, practical advice on migration processes, help with schoolwork, cooking together or giving rides to hobbies and errands. Compassion became a practical basis for reciprocity, helping build the youths' trust in me as an adult and researcher. They often described me as an adult who was not paid to care for them, though I regularly clarified that I did receive a university salary for my fieldwork. This distinction mattered. As one participant explained, care staff were present because

it was their job, whereas I could leave at any time but still chose to spend time with them. These moments illustrate the practical dimension of compassion: balancing proximity and distance, continually interpreting social situations and drawing on embodied knowledge within evolving socio-material contexts.

Third, doing research in a setting that is simultaneously a home, an institution and a workplace requires time, openness and immersion in overlapping social worlds. It was not always easy to position myself as a researcher without taking on educational or colleague-like roles. At times, staff asked me about matters concerning the youths, and I had to decline, reminding them that I had promised not to disclose personal conversations. Speaking up was essential to maintaining trust within the social networks of both the young people and the staff (see [Hopkins 2008](#): 42–43). These multidirectional relationships also shaped the knowledge I could gather and required care-ful considerations about what information, such as details of peer relations or institutional practices, should be excluded from analysis or later in academic publishing. In the next section, I discuss how compassion, as an analytical and ethical dimension, draws on human accountability and ethics of care.

4. COMPASSION AS ANALYTICAL AND ETHICAL: ENCOUNTERING DISTRESSFUL MOMENTS

Recognising painful encounters and, through this recognition, protecting fellow human beings from harm and responding to their suffering is the sentimental basis of any democratic political community ([Clark-Kazak 2022](#); [Nussbaum 2014](#); [Ure & Frost 2014](#): 14; [Waite et al. 2014](#)). Early in the fieldwork, I often found it difficult to understand why distress or pain suddenly surfaced. I therefore began paying close attention to these field encounters to learn how compassion, as a social emotion, could guide my responses. Sometimes, youths signalled discomfort through brief or vague replies. At other times, an ordinary conversation triggered bodily tension. These shifts happened as a result of various triggers: overwhelming life circumstances, worry about family elsewhere or emotional memories blurring past and present. I approached such moments by letting the young people decide how and whether to talk or by simply sharing silence with them. These ‘hanging out’ moments reflect compassionate presence through embodied knowing, with proximity and distance continually negotiated by the youth and my fieldwork aligned accordingly. Engaging durable interest in these emotive–social experiences and ‘feeling together with action’ illustrate the core principles of compassion. Here, it is important to note that the ‘scale of action’ ranged from everyday support to efforts aimed at influencing housing policy and national social support systems. The former actions were felt immediately by the youths, whereas the latter, even when discussed with them, were distant processes whose effects were more likely to benefit those arriving after them. Next, I will provide close readings of two empirical examples and discuss what compassion as a social emotion does and how it operated as a bodily–cognitive tool in the fieldwork.

4.1 MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF THE MOMENT

As part of the fieldwork, I carried out a photography project called *Five photos of my life*, where young people used their mobile phones to photograph things and issues that mattered to them. We then discussed the images in one-to-one conversations. This visual method helped to overcome language barriers and capture forms of belonging that were difficult to verbalise (see [Chase et al. 2020](#); [Korkiamäki & Kaukko 2023](#)). In

one discussion, Samir (*pseudonym*) showed me a photo of his computer and explained that he had started watching football only after arriving in Finland, something he could not do in his country of origin. Since he mentioned his home country, I asked whether he used the computer or Skype to stay in touch with people there. After this additional question posed by me, Samir's bodily presence shifted. (Cursive texts added from Anna-Kaisa's field diary, 4/2015.)

Anna-Kaisa: Right. Anything else about the computer? Do you use it to keep in touch with people in [the name of his country of origin] or with Skype, or anywhere else?

Samir: No. [a longer pause]. I don't really use it that much (really), it's just important for, watching football and, yeah.

(The position of his body changes suddenly. He puts his hands under the chair, and his entire body tenses. I see how uncomfortable he feels and decide to move on to another photo.)

Anna-Kaisa: Ok. Another photo.

(He remains in the same body position but continues to talk. I am wondering whether we should have a break, but I notice that he wants to talk even though the situation has become very hard for him. His voice turns fragile.)

Samir: This is (just), my room. Yeah, so, I have my own room and I think it's nice. Yeah. [Almost whispering]

Anna-Kaisa: [My voice is soft, and I am clearly confused] Why? What's important about it?

Samir: Well, because I can be, on my own and, yeah. Because of that. If you were with someone else, it could be (a bit hard) [pause]. If you're sad sometimes, you think a lot, you've got a lot of things on your mind and, you know I live here without parents and [long pause]. If (I want to be) alone so sometimes (just), yeah, it's...

Anna-Kaisa: Yes. You can be on your own? [I am leaning forward in my chair.]

Samir: [With a very quiet voice] Yeah.

Anna-Kaisa: What kind of things...do you have some things or stuff that mean a lot to you in that room?

Samir: In my own room?

Anna-Kaisa: Mm-hmm...

Samir: Well, there's just, nothing that's most important, everything that's there is important to me. But there's nothing most important there.

Anna-Kaisa: But all that's there is for you...?

Samir: Is yeah (important) [pause]

Anna-Kaisa: Anything else about your room?

Samir: Well, no, nothing else...anymore. [quietly] Yeah.

This short dialogue between Samir and myself is an excellent example how compassion operates between people. The moment contains various bodily reactions

and confusion communicated by the young person and my emotional-cognitive responses to these signals (e.g. [Goetz et al. 2010](#): 359–363). When the memories of the past were mixed with the present, the confusion took over Samir's whole body: his kinaesthetic posture changed, his muscles tensed and his eyesight was turned away. His voice became fragile, and the pauses in the narrative were longer. The dialogue continued with the terms that the youth's verbal and bodily reactions defined; my task was to support the moment and lean on the trust that we had in each other. The rhythm of the dialogue changed too; my questions and affirmations were responses to him, but the silent moments and the unspeakable became central in the dialogue.

The detailed analysis of the transcript shows how the traits of compassion act through my mirroring reactions to his pain; maintaining the visual contact, leaning forward, assessing the situation, deciding to let the youth continue his narrative and softening my voice (see [Goetz et al. 2010](#)). During our discussion, I started to cognitively evaluate the actions and emotions present in the situation. When Samir's bodily reactions changed, I emotionally shifted my presence as well (e.g. [Halifax 2012](#)). As [Ahmed \(2014\)](#) states, subjects do not own the emotions at play, and people are more like nodal points than the origin or destination of such emotions. Emotions, in this case pain, involve movements towards and away from each other. This movement of emotions shapes the social and bodily space ([Ahmed 2014](#): 46, 209). Therefore, my attuning to Samir's pain guided my presence in the situation. When I noticed that his body twisted into a strange position and his voice turned monotonous, it became clear to me that he was experiencing a distressful moment. Simultaneously, typically for a compassionate presence, I used my previous knowledge of these kinds of episodes and combined it with the personal experiences I had with Samir. I intuitively softened my voice, leaned a bit forward but kept a physical distance and did not touch him because I knew that he rarely touched or hugged staff or peers in the housing unit. By using compassion as a cognitive strategy, I then began to maintain the social moment.

In my field notes, I described being confused, worried and sad as Samir's embodied narrative unfolded. I linked his brief comments about 'being alone' and 'having a lot on mind' to earlier encounters with existential loneliness amongst these minors and to its structural roots, such as restrictive family re-unification policies (see [Whitebrook 2014](#)). I also questioned whether I should stop the conversation for ethical reasons. Yet, it became clear that he wanted me to listen. Providing care often requires working with and through emotions ([Clark-Kazak 2022](#)). As an adult researcher, I had a responsibility to ensure his safety, but he also signalled how much he wished to share. This was even further reinforced when moving to the last photo. Samir relaxed, started to lean forward and spoke easily about photo showing a PlayStation 4 console which he used for playing FIFA with friends. Then, before ending the session, he said, *'that's all I have to say, and I really liked taking photos'*.

The above micro-level analysis illustrates how being exposed to each other's presence created a social moment that allowed multiple experiences, (be)longings and emotions to exist at the same time (see [Puumala 2013](#)). Compassion as a social emotion was used when memories of past life were at most intense. For Samir, this meant a safe moment where he could narrate his experiences. For me as a researcher, compassion provided cognitive tools to support and maintain the moment. While I, as an adult researcher, had different responsibilities of caring and working cognitively through this moment, the young person could trust my allyship and commitment to the relationship we had created (see [Clark-Kazak 2022](#): 1153). This empirical example also illustrates how compassion informed the writing of this article as an analytic lens

through which I could interpret how emotions and embodiment shaped the unfolding of our interaction. It also enabled a critical attentiveness to the relational dynamics, highlighting how emotional reciprocity informed both the production of knowledge and the ethical responsibility embedded in this fieldwork encounter. Next, I will discuss further what providing care through compassionate presence means.

4.2 PROVIDING CARE IN THE MOMENT OF CONFUSION

Writing about one of the most intense moments in my fieldwork and analysing Hussain's (*pseudonym*) experience in an academic article has required a lot of ethical pondering. However, my responsibility as a care-ful researcher is to openly discuss how the experiences of forced migration of these young people sometimes create psychological alterations that continue to shake their inner worlds and lives for a long time. Further, I believe it is important that migration scholars acknowledge and reflect on trauma-induced encounters in the fieldwork, as such awareness can contribute to the development of more caring and compassionate research practice.

Previous research has shown that UMs have often experienced multiple forms of abandonment and, in some cases, severe neglect (e.g. [Kaukko & Wernesjö 2017](#); [Korkiamäki & Gilligan 2020](#)). These ruptures and discontinuities in social relations create a sense of ambivalence that shapes their lives and continues to influence how they respond to changing social and emotional situations. I met Hussain during art workshops we organised as part of our research. From the beginning, he formed a strong social connection with me and shared many detailed accounts of his asylum process and personal life in Finland. During one of our workshop days, Hussain repeatedly asked for help in finalising the art mask he was making. I interpret that his gestures of seeking closeness during the art workshop were not just requests for help but invitations to be seen and heard. These moments can be profoundly meaningful in the lives of young people who have experienced several abandonments. We were also nearing the end of our fieldwork, and Hussain was aware that we might not meet many times in the future. We had discussed our 'exit' from the field openly and provided contact details for those young people who wished to stay in touch. Despite our efforts to work in a care-ful and ethically sensitive manner, it is morally important to acknowledge that our approaching departure may have triggered the dissociative moment we witnessed with Hussain. The following excerpt is from a field diary I wrote after the workshop day:

I open the trunk of my car, and Hussain who has followed us from the house, suddenly jumps into the trunk. First, he just sits there, and I say to him: 'Oh, do you want to come with us?'

He smiles at us but then crawls deeper into the trunk and makes his body as tiny as he can. Puts his arms around his feet and body and lies there. Hussain starts to talk slowly in Finnish (which is not his native language): 'I was here, another boy there and a third one there...and then there was a fourth boy on top of us all. That is how we...that is how we left from my country.'

Then Hussain jumps out of the trunk and stands totally frozen in front of me. I hug him. Hussain is shivering. I continue hugging him and finally say to him: 'You're so cold now and you don't even have a jacket on you'. I let him go, but I reali[s]e from his facial expressions and eyes that he is still 'inside' this painful memory. I start hugging him again. We hug for a little while, and he does not say anything. When we stop hugging, both of my fellow researchers

hug the boy, too. Then Hussain looks at us, smiles a little bit, takes his bike from the ground and runs to the back of the house. We, three adults, are left outside the house, staring at one another. (Anna-Kaisa's field diary, 11/2016)

As the diary quote illustrates, Hussain experienced a dissociative moment where past life experiences were mixed with the present. These harsh flashback experiences and re-lived memories of journeying often appear unexpectedly, and they indicate how emotional entanglements with several time-spaces are embodied in these young people's lives. The extract shows how ordinary daily events may suddenly turn into heartbreaking struggles of (be)longing and psychological distress. The journeying did not stop when Hussain had arrived in Finland: he missed his home country; he recalled the hiding as a kinaesthetic practice still in his body; and, for some reason, the present moment, its social relations and the environment began to mix with the past. The trunk of the car was materially present, yet, at the same time, it was not – being just a material artefact that was triggering the embodied memory (Murrani et al. 2022). Also, the memory of hiding was true, but the timing and the context was distorted between past and present.

As outsiders to his re-lived memory of escaping his homeland, the team of researchers witnessed Hussain's altered sense of time and space, intense flashbacks and feeling of disconnection from himself and his surroundings. During this moment, we provided safety and care through compassion and gently guiding him, with words and hugs, to calm down and slowly return to the present moment. Because a researcher is not a psychologist or therapist, witnessing a dissociative moment can feel disturbing. I remember being confused and simultaneously trying to recall techniques from the trauma intervention training I had attended before the start of the fieldwork. From that, I knew my role was to stay present and use my bodily-cognitive strategies to create safety in Hussain's freeze-flight-fight experience. These compassionate measures can be seen as 'grounding actions' which aim at stabilising the dissociative moment (see Chessell et al. 2019). When a dissociative episode occurs, it is often impossible for outsiders to determine what triggers it or why the past intrudes on the present. This notion is important in relation to research ethics: triggers that might lead to dissociation are usually ordinary daily events, sounds, smells etc. and thus they cannot be prevented by research design measures. However, a researcher's attitude and response to such dissociative moments and other painful emotional encounters in the fieldwork are crucial. Creating a safe space by using compassion as a social emotion seems to be one effective way. In addition, being ethically responsible requires measures that provide support and aftercare for those involved in these situations (Clark-Kazak 2022).

After the above-described episode, we checked up that Hussain went safely inside the house, where the care staff was. We also met him in the final workshop and asked him how he was doing, but he did not want to discuss the event anymore. This ambivalent response from Hussain is very understandable. Often, these dissociative moments are not remembered clearly, if at all. Also, the emotional burden of reflecting on these again might raise fear, anxiety or even shame, and that is why it is very important to respect the person's choice of not going back to these memories. This moment with Hussain, however, changed the work conduct of our team. As a research team, we had several discussions after experiencing this moment at the end of our fieldwork. We provided each other support, collegial selfcare and we also discussed how we might act differently if witnessing these kinds of situations again. This way, our professional

reflections related to the ethics of encountering and what role compassion had in these micro-moments of care, along with the question of whether that was enough to ensure care-ful research conduct. Therefore, as I have argued throughout this article, compassion in research should not be deployed merely as a means of gaining access but instead should be understood in relation to the ethical and analytical responsibilities it brings to this shared knowledge production.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined compassion as both a social emotion and a practice of encountering in ethnographic research with UMs. I have argued that compassion's action potential arises in relational moments that balance proximity and distance, enabling exposure, cognitive engagement and action in both fieldwork and broader political contexts. Rather than a mere feeling, compassion is a relational and cognitive process that can guide ethical, caring research conduct. Through the cases of Samir and Hussain, I showed how compassion supports engagement with (be)longing and vulnerability. I proposed that compassion functions as a practice of encountering, an ethical commitment and an analytical tool. I also highlighted the importance of collective awareness in migration research: sharing difficult field experiences can strengthen collegial support and foster sustainable research practices grounded in the ethics of care. While researchers have an ethical responsibility not to deliberately probe into traumatic events or memories in participants' lives, when such experiences emerge during fieldwork, our obligation is to engage with them in a care-ful and ethically sensitive manner, guided by compassionate actions and attentiveness.

Compassionate actions in research involved spending time together, offering care and support, creating safe spaces for emotional expression and being available to listen. In the interpretive phase, compassion helped me close-read fieldwork encounters and identify how this social emotion and embodied practice shaped our shared knowledge production. Ethically, it highlighted how we enter, relate to and leave the field and how our presence may influence those we work with.

Finally, compassion is not only a response to suffering but also a potential catalyst for change in social relations, research practices and broader political structures. Its power lies in responding to perceived needs beyond the immediate field context. Although this article has focused on ethnographic fieldwork, I have discussed compassionate politics and solidarity work elsewhere, arguing that critical migration research must propose alternatives to the unjust practices our participants describe (e.g. [Kuusisto-Arponen 2016b](#); [Kuusisto & Korjonen-Kuusipuro 2018](#); [Kuusisto & Korjonen-Kuusipuro 2025](#)). Accordingly, my research team has contributed to local and national policy processes – for instance, on alternative housing models and sustainable social support mechanisms for UMs in Finland. Such knowledge transfer aligns with the idea that a politics of compassion can generate action potential of transforming unequal and unjust politico-administrative structures ([Whitebrook 2014](#)).

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