# Fieldwork, or Family Therapy?

**Kinship, Status, and Therapeutic Ethnography in Sumedang, West Java**

*Nicholas J. Long*

**Abstract**

This essay reflects on the experience of doing anthropological fieldwork with psychotherapists, showing how research activities that initially appear to be irrelevant to an 'anthropology of psychotherapy' may nevertheless be framed by research participants as therapeutically significant interventions into the lives of their associates. It draws on ethnography from West Java, Indonesia, where my own attendance at a village wedding was used by a prominent psychotherapist as a tool for resolving a family dispute. The essay shows how the dissemination of psychotherapeutic knowledges in Indonesia is not only generating new forms of sociality for anthropologists to document, but also transforming the understandings, experiences, and ethics of fieldwork. Simultaneously, it sheds light on some of the tensions that currently run through family life in West Java, including tensions that are precipitated by the burgeoning of the psychotherapy industry itself. The essay features in a festschrift for the German anthropologist Martin Rössler: the analysis reveals the ongoing salience of Rössler's work to Indonesian Studies.

**Keywords**

fieldwork impact, Indonesia, marital relations, Martin Rössler, psychotherapy, weddings

Upon being invited to write a piece in honour of Martin Rössler, my thoughts immediately turned to his many contributions to Indonesian studies, including his seminal analyses of such themes as Islamisation, kinship structure, factionalism, authority and supernatural artefacts in upland South Sulawesi. Yet they also turned to more personal memories of Martin – especially of staying in his home when he invited me to discuss my work in a seminar with his Masters students. I have such vivid recollections of this trip: of Martin and Birgitt's marvellous hospitality; of evenings spent wandering around Bergisch Gladbach, sharing stories of fieldwork; and of the seminar itself. This latter involved some fascinating discussions and had exposed a disjuncture between many students' presumptions that anthropological research necessitated a comprehensive pre-determined research design and the more spontaneous, exploratory approach that had allowed me, over time, to develop a systematic ethnography of an Indonesian town. I was pleased that Martin saw this to be an important learning point for the students. On the journey home he amusedly, but approvingly, invoked the casual way in which the anthropologist Christian Pelras had once advised him of the secret to good ethnographic research: 'just talking with friends'.

This essay attempts to do justice to these multiple strands of connection with Martin. It concerns an occasion that parallels my trip to Bergisch Gladbach, when a distinguished Indonesian psychotherapist invited me to give a seminar on ethnographic methods to some Masters students. The style is narrative, not unlike the many 'tales from fieldwork' that Martin, Birgitt and I have shared. Yet it underscores the virtues of an open-ended approach to fieldwork, revealing how embracing the unplanned and seemingly irrelevant afforded me new perspectives on my 'fieldwork impact' (Cooley 2003), whilst also yielding analytic and empirical insights – including into issues prominent in Martin's own ethnographic oeuvre.

I address those issues, however, in a context far-removed from upland Sulawesi. Since the early 2000s, Indonesia has witnessed a 'hypnosis boom', with thousands of citizens training to become hypnotherapists (Long 2018). Their clients present with problems ranging from phobias and addictions to chronic pain and lack of motivation, but the most common is family disharmony. To address such issues, therapists sometimes supplement their hypnosis with other psychotherapeutic procedures – including those associated with neuro-linguistic programming, family therapy, parts therapy, and ego-state therapy. My current research investigates the emergent forms of life precipitated by the globalisation and vernacularisation of these varied therapeutic discourses. My 'fieldsite' is not a specific locality, but Indonesia's entire 'hypnotherapy circuit', a male-dominated professional network that extends nationwide but is concentrated on Java, where many of its most respected and influential figures are based. It is one such figure – Cecep, an irrepressible Sundanese man in his fifties, often identified by research participants as amongst the greatest of all Indonesian hypnotherapists – who lies at the heart of this essay.

Cecep stood out for the breadth of his psychotherapeutic expertise. He was also extraordinarily well connected: after meeting me for an interview, he put me in touch with dozens of

therapists from across Indonesia. I gladly returned this favour by agreeing to run a seminar on ethnographic methods at his local higher education campus. He suggested I spend a few days at his house beforehand. He would pick me up. It sounded straightforward. Little did I know that the experience would differ markedly from what I had envisaged, affording insights into the world of Indonesian therapy – and the construction of Cecep's reputation – that I could otherwise have missed.

**An Unexpected Wedding**

It was time to set off. Cecep leapt out of his gleaming black people-carrier, boyish energy animating his lined face as he introduced me to his wife, Nining, who smiled at me serenely. We were joined for the journey by Zukhruf – a hypnotherapist I had just been interviewing, who saw Cecep as something of a father figure. Cecep chatted animatedly to us both as we drove through the West Javanese countryside, with Nining occasionally offering wry interventions. Their driver, Pak Dedeng, remained taciturn.

The journey was enjoyable, but unexpectedly long, involving numerous detours. At one in the morning, we finally pulled up outside an imposing house in a small village in the district of Sumedang. I was confused. This was many miles from Cecep and Nining's home.

'Kang Nick,' said Cecep brightly, using the informal term of address that one uses for a 'big brother' or a male peer, 'I have been invited to two weddings this week. At the same time! You and my wife will represent me here in Sumedang, and Pak Dedeng and I will go to Jakarta.' I was shocked, and somewhat annoyed: I had been looking forward to gaining a deeper understanding of Cecep's life and practice; now it transpired my 'key informant' was heading to another city! Happily, Zukhruf elected to keep me company in Sumedang; I could at least spend time with one hypnotherapist. 'This is what Pak Cecep is like,' Zukhruf said soothingly, 'it's best to just go along with it.' I followed one of my new hosts upstairs – the house was teeming with people and I was too tired and disoriented to remember who they all were – and promptly fell asleep.

The ceremony began early; by six in the morning I was showered, dressed, and sipping hot coffee as my hosts asked about my reasons for visiting Indonesia and excitedly informed me that today's ceremony would be a rare opportunity to witness a full performance of traditional Sumedang wedding customs (*adat*), including a procession of dancers and clowns, followed by the bride and groom in regal attire. 'Very interesting for an anthropologist,' a young woman in a salmon headscarf assured me with a joyous smile, 'great for your research!'

I did my best to smile enthusiastically. Not only were the wedding traditions of rural West Java a far cry from the topics at the heart of my research, the idea of parachuting into an unknown community for two days in order to document their 'customs' seemed to embody the most retrograde and extractive of anthropological practices. Yet when the wedding procession began, it proved so beautiful and colourful and entertaining (Figure 1) that I readily stepped into the role of ethnologist-cum-tourist, taking countless pictures on my phone, and enthusiastically sampling the culinary

delicacies with which I was furnished by Pak Engkus, the kindly middle-aged man sitting next to me, as villagers looked on curiously to see whether a Westerner could handle the spice.

*Figure 1: Wedding celebrations in Sumedang, West Java*

Upon returning to the house, Zukhruf remarked that this was the first time he had ever seen the full Sumedang *adat*. He had not wanted anything so showy for his own marriage: he preferred to focus on the commitment between the couple. Nining declared the ceremony 'odd'. The village, she explained, was sharply divided along religious lines, with one half affiliated to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – a traditionalist organization of which Nining herself was a strong supporter – and the other half affiliated to Persatuan Islam (PERSIS), a staunchly reformist movement strongly opposed to traditionalism and local religious practice. The wedding represented a union of families from each side of this divide, and although it had featured a full repertoire of Sumedang *adat*, the formal ceremony had been conducted as PERSIS preferred, with the bride and groom each performing a separate ritual, before being brought together. 'That's not traditional,' Nining tutted, 'and besides, it's hypocritical. That couple have been dating for years. It's not as though they've only just met on their wedding day.' We talked a little about how the religious life of the couple was likely to proceed.

Nining suggested that anything was possible. Then she abruptly changed tack. 'You know, a lot of people tell me Kang Cecep is having an affair. But that's not true.' She paused. 'In Islam, it only counts if there are multiple witnesses present. And I've yet to hear from any witness.' Smiling wanly, she shuffled to her guest room.

Nining's reflections had tempered the festive mood, but not for long, as Adina, the young woman in the salmon headscarf, soon reappeared to propose a tour of the area. This, it turned out, involved riding in the back of a tractor, and the bumpiness of the journey prompted much hilarity. There were more sober moments too – not least when Adina took us to meet an old man, whose relationship to her I never fully understood, but whom she indicated was dying. Though he tired quickly, he gripped my hands tightly when I was introduced to him as a special visitor who had come to Sumedang to research its wedding customs, and beamed as I assured him I had found the procession both very beautiful and interestingly different from weddings I had observed in Sumatra.

After we got back, I was beginning to flag for lack of sleep. When a gruff man named Khushadi subjected me to an interminable monologue, I could feel myself glazing over. By the time of the wedding's evening event – a religious talk on the value of marriage and childbirth, for which I had been reserved a VIP seat – I could barely stay awake. The sermon was in Sundanese (a language I don't speak), and my tiredness, the amplified sound, and the cigarette smoke hanging heavy in the air made me feel dizzy, even nauseous. Yet what could I do? I knew it would be rude to walk away. Suddenly I had a flash of inspiration. I turned to Pak Engkus, seated next to me once again. 'Sorry, but I think I need to go back to the house,' I explained humbly, 'I have a stomach ache. Maybe it's because the food earlier was so spicy, or…'

'Of course! Go ahead,' he said, concerned and kindly. I slipped away as unobtrusively as possible and began the short journey back up the road. To my surprise, Zukhruf was following me.

'There's no need to join me,' I told him, feeling guilty that he was being wrested from the event – and also somewhat smothered by his attentiveness. While I hadn't felt great listening to the sermon, I explained, the house was close by: I could easily get back by myself.

'Kang Nick,' Zukhruf replied conspiratorially, 'I *hate* being around cigarette smoke. If I didn't accompany you back now' – and here he paused to emphasise the horror – 'I would have had to stay until the very end!' Thus it was that we returned to the house, where the faint sounds of preaching lulled us both to sleep.

**Interim reflections**

So far, this essay represents a typical 'fieldwork confessional', as characterised by van Maanen (1988, 75), foregrounding an 'ironic self-portrait' of the researcher and the vicissitudes of fieldwork – but in a way that nevertheless reveals ethnographic truths. It charts the contours of a cultural world 'within which the intrepid fieldworker will roam' (1988, 75) – and in the process shows how several of the themes Martin has addressed in his own research, including the divisive influence of Islamic

reformism (Rössler 1997, 276-277) and the dynamics of village factionalism (Rössler 2000, 551-552), continue to resonate in Indonesia today.

The account also reveals the ambivalences, contestations and critiques surrounding ostensibly fêted occasions such as weddings, highlighting the importance of the approach to social analysis that Martin has championed over his career: one that acknowledges general worldviews, outlooks and 'cultural themes' that typify social life in a particular time and place (Rössler 1990, 293), whilst also examining how commitments to cultural possibilities are influenced by individual motivations and strategies (Rössler 1997, 275) and how social events unfold in ways reflecting the development of social conflicts, the negotiation of individual interests, and the interpretation and circumvention of rules (Rössler 2008, 192). For while my vignettes of feigning interest in Sumedang *adat* and mobilising the stereotype of spice-averse Westerners to escape the evening sermon exemplify the pressures, dilemmas, moral shortcomings and petty triumphs that characterise much ethnographic fieldwork, Zukhruf's decision to accompany me home out of a fabricated concern for my welfare shows that ambivalences, tensions and feelings of obligation regarding cultural practices are not only felt by 'cultural outsiders', but can pervade the very social worlds that anthropologists seek to document.

At this point in the trip, however, I had only scratched the surface of the Sumedang wedding, and the conflicts and interests underpinning the way events had unfolded.

**Fieldwork, or therapy?**

Cecep was back the next day, along with Pak Dedeng – who, I now discovered, was Cecep's point of connection to this Sumedang family. In fact, the surly, taciturn Dedeng was none other than the husband of vivacious Adina. I must visit their home, Adina insisted – it was just a short drive away – and while she and Dedeng apologized for its simplicity, the very business of serving a guest coconut water and fresh fritters seemed to fill Adina with delight; Dedeng too seemed more relaxed and lively than he did behind the wheel, and their son gamely played along with jokes that I might use my newfound research knowledge to hypnotise him (Figure 2). Then it was time to bid farewell to Sumedang and prepare for the ethnographic methods seminar. Zukhruf did not join me for this leg of the journey: his wife was summoning him home. 'It's odd being a husband,' he subsequently reflected, 'my wife is constantly asking me to come home – but then when I get home, she just ignores me and goes to sleep. It's like I'm a pet – she can only rest once she knows I'm safe.'

*Figure 2: Visiting Dedeng, Adina, and their son at home.*

After the seminar, Cecep had arranged for Dedeng to drive me to Bandung. He and Nining accompanied me for the journey – not least because Cecep had something he wanted to reveal. The trip from Sumedang, far from being an unwanted interruption to my research into emergent Indonesian therapeutics, had been 'an exercise in family therapy' – with me as the intervention!

For several months, Cecep explained, relations between Pak Dedeng and Adina had been strained. These difficulties stemmed from structural tensions surrounding their marriage. By virtue of his position in the kinship structure, Dedeng was expected to look up to (*menyegani*) and be deferential to his father-in-law, Engkus (the man I had sat next to at the wedding). In other respects, however, Dedeng was higher-status than Engkus: he was of noble blood, which offered Adina's family upward mobility (a dynamic also evident in Sulawesi - see Rössler 1997, 284); and he was several years older. There was hence an 'odd dynamic' between the two men. Tensions had reached a head earlier in the year, when one of Engkus's parents had passed away. Dedeng and Adina had not attended the funeral. Engkus, as the eldest son of the deceased, lost considerable face as a result of their absence. This compounded the increasingly sour relationship between Dedeng and Adina, who was allegedly consumed by jealousy and suspicion of her husband's absences from home.

Hosting a foreign anthropologist, however, especially one ostensibly researching Sumedang wedding *adat*, had allowed Engkus's reputation in the village to be restored. That the wedding had attracted international interest heightened the 'specialness' of the occasion; Engkus would gain considerable social capital from bringing me to the event, and Dedeng could improve his standing with his in-laws for having brought me to Engkus. Meanwhile, hosting a guest had allowed Adina to break out of a rut. 'Pak Dedeng is very grateful to you, Kang Nick,' Cecep proclaimed, 'it has been months since he saw his wife smiling or laughing. But having you around has made her happy, and now he has been able to see her laugh with abandon.'

'I think it was nice for her to see someone else's face,' interjected Dedeng sadly, 'rather than just me all the time.'

'It has allowed Pak Dedeng to see a side of his wife that he has not been accustomed to seeing,' continued Cecep, undeterred, 'and one that is more appealing than her usual way of carrying herself.' As a result, he announced, harmonious relations between husband and wife had been restored.

In many respects, Cecep's explanation exemplifies prevailing therapeutic logics in Indonesia and beyond. Kuan (2017, 246-247) describes how family therapy involves 'jolting' families out of 'habitual ways of relating' and into 'new ways of being' – a process that Indonesian therapists often described, using the language of neuro-linguistic programming, as overcoming 'mental blocks'. Perhaps more distinctly Indonesian – and informed by contemporary Islamic models of metaphysics and personhood – was the notion that such interventions typically worked by 'unlocking' or 'restoring' originary qualities of the self, such as conscience, devotion, or – as in Adina's case – joy, from which subjects had become estranged via exposure to the social world (see Long n.d.). They thus recalibrated relationships, but also established a new *telos* for future projects of ethical self-cultivation. Usually, interventions occurred within a bracketed-off space and time explicitly dedicated to 'therapy', whether via dialogue, enactments, or the induction of trance and administration of suggestions. What made the Sumedang case unusual was that the 'therapy' had occurred 'in the wild.'

Though this was uncommon amongst most therapists that I knew in Indonesia, it was not so for Cecep. He told me of how he once helped a multi-national corporation that was receiving threats and hassle from local *preman* (organised criminals). He had advised against involving the police, instead meeting with the *preman* directly and teaching them how to draft a formal 'proposal' so that the resources they desired could be secured in a manner that was legible to foreign businessmen. He also highlighted his skill in handling difficult personalities, like Khushadi, the man from Sumedang whose long monologue I had found tedious, and who Dedeng confessed to finding insufferable. 'Pak Khushadi has an inferiority complex because he only went to primary school' Cecep explained, referencing the way in which education serves as source of status and indicator of 'modernity' and 'human resource quality' in contemporary Indonesia. 'As soon as he brought that up I said, "Sure, you've only been to elementary school, but no high school would be able to teach what you've

learned through your successful business." That immediately stopped him holding forth. I get on well with Khushadi now.'

Such narratives, to which an account of the events in Sumedang could now be added, may partly illuminate why Cecep commanded so much respect in Indonesia's (hypno)therapy circles – even more so than equally learned and commercially successful therapists. Notably, he attracted such reverence despite actively rejecting the idea that therapeutic skill or efficacy might be grounded in mystical or supernatural practices, such as the accumulation of extraordinary spiritual potency or the possession of sacred heirlooms invested with supernatural power, even though such practices are associated with authority in many parts of Indonesia (Keeler 1987; Rössler 1990, 2000), and are drawn on by some hypnotists to distinguish themselves from their rivals (Long 2018, 86-88). Nevertheless, the form of Cecep's narratives replicated longstanding tropes of a single figure, physically small and slight, being able to manipulate privileged and potentially dangerous others – the *preman*, foreign bosses, successful businessmen, even a visiting researcher – by virtue of his extraordinary spiritual prowess (see Keeler 1987). Indeed, the Sumedang intervention had even been achieved without Cecep being physically present, echoing the idea that the 'potent person' can actualise their desires with only a modicum of worldly effort. Even as he sought to educate Indonesians away from supernaturalism and mysticism, Cecep's 'psychotherapeutic' intervention were legibly impressive by the measure of those very discourses, a point that helps account for his extraordinary reputation but which also underscores the methodological importance of analysing cultural themes alongside individual thought and action (see Rössler 1990, 293).

The trip to Sumedang also afforded a glimpse of the sadness and anxiety that sometimes underpinned therapeutic authority and reputation. In Nining's anxieties about Cecep's possible infidelity, the references to Adina's 'jealousy', and even, reading between the lines, Zukhruf's summons home, I came to see how, even as the burgeoning therapy industry presents itself as correcting dysfunctional tendencies in Indonesian kinship, the frequent travel that characterised life as a successful therapist could place considerable strain on therapists' own families, and indeed those of their drivers and event organisers, often in gendered ways. It is doubtful how readily apparent this critical insight would have been without taking a detour from conducting fieldwork in clinics, training seminars, or pre-planned home visits where familial tensions would typically be concealed from view.

Finally, the episode shows how the impacts of a fieldworker's presence are not always matters that the researcher is best placed to judge. Sometimes, by embracing the unanticipated and seemingly irrelevant, by submitting to caricatures of foreigners, or misrepresentations of our research agendas, we not only gain unexpected insights into our fieldsites and research topics, but participate in affectively-laden moments that prove lastingly consequential. Moreover, as new idioms enter circulation, so the ways in which such 'fieldwork impact' is conceptualised, anticipated, and even elicited are changing. As seen in my own 'fieldwork' being (re)framed as 'family therapy', the dissemination of psychotherapeutic knowledges in Indonesia is not only generating new forms of

sociality for anthropologists to document, but transforming the understandings, experiences, and ethics of fieldwork itself.

## Final thoughts

Many of the central themes in Martin Rössler's research remain key concerns for anthropologists working in Indonesia today. His ethnographies prove a vital resource for understanding such issues as authority, status, kinship structure and Islamic identities in comparative perspective – although such an analysis lies well beyond the scope of this brief narrative essay. My goals with this short 'tale from the field' have been more modest – and yet, in some ways, further reaching. I have offered a brief snapshot of some of the concerns animating life in a West Javanese village, and some of the relational dynamics, cultural themes, and practical logics permeating Indonesia's burgeoning therapy circuit. I have sought to evoke the frustrations, pleasures, and surprises of fieldwork – but also to reveal how the circulation and vernacularisation of global therapeutic discourse is allowing the presence and impact of the fieldworker to be conceptualised and harnessed in new ways. Most fundamentally, however, the account demonstrates the layered complexity of social life – and underscores how lucky Martin's students and colleagues have been to have a mentor who challenges them to think carefully about the interrelations between the individual, the social and the cultural, whilst encouraging them to embrace the open-ended possibilities that can arise from talking with friends.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the ESRC [ref. ES/T013796/1] and the LSE Research Infrastructure and Investment Fund.

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