

Response to Amy Pollard's paper "Field of screams: difficulty and ethnographic fieldwork"

By Christine Barry (King's College London)

Pollard's paper raises important issues around PhD (and other) fieldwork in anthropology.

All PhD students will experience some emotional responses during their studies. I have written myself in this journal about the emotions I experienced coming out of the field in my own doctoral fieldwork (Barry 2002). The fact that the doctoral ride is a bumpy one, whilst recognised by any peer support group of PhD students, does not tend to feature much in printed discussions of the PhD process. It is more of a hidden discourse – part of what Latour and Woolgar (1986) describe as informal accounts that never make it into formal presentations and publications. For example, Potter's (2006) book *Doing postgraduate research* does not mention the ups and downs and the possible roller-coaster of emotions that might be in store. Murray (2002) does describe "fear and loathing", but only in the final stages of the write-up of the thesis.

So it is a breath of fresh air to read an honest account of the arduous path of Amy Pollard and her fellow PhD students. My hunch is that many students feel they are the only ones having such problems, and to bring this debate into the public eye can only be of help to students and their supervisors. I do feel it is a particularly relevant discussion for students of anthropology and their teachers to be having.

I have had the benefit of moving between academic disciplines. I studied psychology for my undergraduate degree, then worked as a researcher in sociology departments for eight years before deciding to do my PhD within the discipline of anthropology. I particularly chose anthropology to learn ethnographic methodology from the discipline that invented it.

It is my perception, from this cross-disciplinary viewpoint, that doctoral research in anthropology is by far the hardest to conduct in the social sciences. The rigours of fieldwork are usually greater, as has been clearly highlighted by the students canvassed by Pollard. The burden of analysis is much greater with the mass of unstructured data that a long participant observation stint can produce. Then there is the lack of a clear, well-defined method for writing up, certainly compared to psychology which utilises an experimental model. Dealing with each of these stages of the PhD offers the opportunity for difficult emotions to arise in any discipline (for example see Kleinman and Copp [1993] for a discussion of emotions that can arise whilst doing fieldwork, and Ball [1990] on emotional responses to the process of analysis). Given the unstructured nature of anthropological fieldwork analysis and

writing there is likely to be greater opportunity for stresses to be experienced and emotions to surface.

So why is there such resistance to these problems being aired? Pollard talks of the “silence” that surrounds these experiences, for example in students returning from fieldwork and presenting to their departments. There also seems to be consensus that there is insufficient preparation prior to fieldwork.

Why are some supervisors of little help with supporting students through difficult fieldwork experiences? For a start most academics are much more pressurised and stressed in their own work than when I started in academia in the 1990s, and so have less energy to give their students. In addition to this, my theory is that it is human nature to replicate the kind of support individuals were given themselves when studying for their own PhDs. Then the failings of one generation to support its students are carried down to the next. For this reason supervisors may need intensive training to learn how to operate differently. Maybe such training will never change the way some supervisors operate – particularly in an academic era with primary emphasis on tenured staff to publish and bring in grant money, where students’ needs might get left by the wayside. Perhaps others should be looked to to better fulfil this support/training role.

I very much like Pollard’s recommendation for a mentoring scheme. Although I disagree that no such mentor should have tenure in any university department. This would rule out many potentially useful mentors who could also model that it is possible to have a hard time doing the PhD and go on to develop a successful career in academia. I feel that such a scheme might well work without remuneration and become a self-perpetuating success as each person successfully mentored would be happy to provide the same service for another for free.

The mentor scheme of course relies on the individual experience of the mentor being sufficient to assist the mentee. Another recommendation I would add is for group peer support. With multiple perspectives it is perhaps more likely that someone in the group will have some helpful advice. Perhaps there could be a UK-wide internet forum for anthropologists in the field at any one time to share experiences and offer support. Students might benefit by preparing for fieldwork stresses by looking into the discussion forum’s archives before they set off, and from real-time support once in the field. Maybe services such as the academic jiscmail facility could be used to set up such a service? Or perhaps Anthropology Matters could use the publication of this edition of the journal as an opportunity to set up a national discussion forum as part of its online activities?

References

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