

Fieldwork support: introduction

By Ingie Hovland

This issue of *Anthropology Matters* features an opening piece by Amy Pollard, which presents the results of her interviews with 16 PhD students concerning difficulties encountered during their fieldwork. The piece is both powerful and provocative – not because it sets out to apportion blame, but because it raises several salient questions concerning the nature of training and support that UK anthropology PhD students receive before, during and after fieldwork. No doubt it will also prompt memories in many readers of their own fieldwork experiences. I hope that it may serve as an aid for thoughtful discussions in pre-fieldwork courses, post-fieldwork seminars, and departmental planning meetings regarding how best to organise fieldwork training and support. *Anthropology Matters* invited four academics – Christine Barry, Sara Delamont, David Mills, and Judith Okely – to start the discussion by writing brief responses to Pollard’s account.

The journal issue then presents two in-depth accounts of fieldwork: “The other side of fieldwork: experiences and challenges of conducting research in the border area of Rwanda/eastern Congo”, by Larissa Begley, and “Being cool or being good: researching mobile phones in Mozambique”, by Julie Soleil Archambault. The two accounts complement each other. Begley’s article describes fieldwork in a highly politicised context, where at times she feared for her own safety and the safety of her informants. Having to make decisions on her own about how to handle dangerous situations in the field was a heavy challenge, and the fear that she experienced during fieldwork stayed with her when she returned to the UK. Archambault, on the other hand, depicts fieldwork in a setting that was not politically dangerous but filled with the everyday realities of relationships between people, including friendships made and broken, gossip and neighbourhood judgments. She describes situations of acceptance and rejection, discomfort and awkwardness, and occasionally feeling cornered and wanting to disappear. Both authors reflect on how they sought to come to grips with their particular difficulties while in the field, and how memories of the difficulties either helped or hindered them as they started the post-fieldwork period of analysis.

Finally, the issue is rounded off with a piece that moves from PhD fieldwork to collaborative field research with undergraduate students. Laura DeLuca writes about the benefits and challenges of supporting undergraduates who have assisted her on her research projects, and the reader is given valuable insight into this process through five short memoir essays written by five of the undergraduate students themselves. In her conclusion, DeLuca writes: “One of my biggest challenges as a project director was to slow down and pay attention to research dynamics instead of forging forward in the desire to complete more interviews and accomplish more ethnographic work.”

This might stand as an appropriate introductory comment to the journal issue as a whole; I hope that it will aid in the task of slowing down and paying attention to research dynamics.

Emotions in ethnography

Pollard has coded her interview material around a range of difficult emotions that the PhD students faced: feeling alone, ashamed, bereaved, betrayed, depressed, desperate, disappointed, disturbed, embarrassed, fearful, frustrated, guilty, harassed, homeless, paranoid, regretful, silenced, stressed, trapped, uncomfortable, unprepared, unsupported, and unwell. In the comments that follow the article, Barry and Mills both reflect on the fact that emotions are an inextricable part of the ethnographic method. It cannot – and should not – be a goal of research training to seek to eliminate difficult emotional states and experiences during fieldwork and writing up. Students who are conducting ethnographic research at a PhD level will inevitably experience a range of the emotions described by Pollard.

Emotional difficulties that might reasonably be expected to occur during ethnographic fieldwork may include, for example, a period of disorienting and depressing culture shock, a certain degree of loneliness, and bouts of frustration and disappointment. As Mills points out, such difficult emotions will be part of the “overall shape of this emotional roller-coaster”, which also includes emotional “highs” – such as curiosity, motivation, insight, inspiration, and excitement. If one attempted to retain the highs but eliminate the lows it would tear apart the fabric of the creative research process. Some such creative roller-coasters have been described previously in *Anthropology Matters*, especially in the issues “Fielding emotions” (2007, www.anthropologymatters.com/journal/2007-1/index.htm) and “Writing up and feeling down” (2007, www.anthropologymatters.com/journal/2007-2/index.htm).

On the other hand, it is clearly also possible for ethnographers to fall into difficult and destructive emotional states that paralyse or hinder the research process. It is noteworthy that several of Pollard’s interviewees state that they were seriously depressed during fieldwork. Some also speak of debilitating and long-term anxiety, and others mention long-term stress. Some report instances of sexual harassment that understandably had an impact on their state of mind. Such emotional difficulties should not be regarded as a necessary part of ethnography, and some of the provocation of Pollard’s study lies in the fact that the students were, on the whole, not very well supported when faced with these more debilitating difficulties.

Significantly, it does not seem that the departments and doctoral supervisors of these students had engaged in discussions with them regarding which types of emotional difficulties might fall within the category of the expected and potentially productive, and which types of emotional difficulties might be considered severe, debilitating, or would require the student to actively seek out further support.

Tropes and silences

Why had these discussions not taken place? Part of the answer may lie in the fact that there is a veritable linguistic tangle surrounding difficulties in fieldwork. Both Delamont and Mills mention that rhetorical strategies are part and parcel of anthropological accounts of fieldwork; as Mills says, pointing out “the lack of

preparation, support and useful training one receives is almost an established biographical trope in anthropology”. Pollard’s interviewees are drawing on this rhetorical legacy too when they denounce the uselessness of their pre-fieldwork courses. But, as Mills emphasises, this does not mean that we should disregard the seriousness of some of the difficulties as they are stated by Pollard’s interviewees – because the students are also heirs to significant disciplinary silences concerning actual lacks in pre-fieldwork courses.

PhD students, to a greater extent than established anthropologists, are caught between rhetorical tropes and silences, and it is no mean feat to find words to describe fieldwork problems; Barry refers to the “hidden discourse” of PhD difficulties. But, one might ask, as Delamont does, are there not a plethora of fieldwork accounts that the students could read, filled with stories of hardship and frustration, “misery and incomprehension” in the field? Well, it is one thing to read and learn something from the many accounts of “misery and incomprehension”; it is quite another to voice any similar sort of incomprehension or frustration with one’s research subjects as a post-fieldwork student in a departmental seminar. The chances are that any post-fieldwork student who tries this will be subtly, or not so subtly, corrected (as described e.g. by Heaton Shrestha 2007), and is likely to feel afterwards that she did not make a good enough impression on peers or faculty.

Okely states, quite rightly, that “the traditional, often masculinist mask of competence has to be dropped”; but how can one do so in a post-fieldwork seminar or PhD thesis? Descriptions of fieldwork difficulties are far safer to air in retrospect, when one’s research has already been published, than when one is in the midst of writing up and is dependent on a few key faculty members to evaluate one’s research account and one’s maturity as a researcher, and to write references for job applications. This is how anthropology seminars allow familiar *tropes* of hardship to co-exist, rather unproductively, with *silences* concerning actual PhD hardship.

The gendered culture of anthropology

In addition to reflecting on the “masculinist mask of competence”, Okely also discusses whether gender may have had an unspoken effect on Pollard’s account, in terms of the types of difficulties encountered by the students (the majority of whom were female, while their supervisors seem predominantly male), and how this places them within long-term gendered legacies in the academy. One of the most important gendered nodes in pre-fieldwork training and fieldwork support is the student–supervisor relationship, and it may not always fall naturally to male supervisors to discuss possible difficulties, including sexual harassment or stalking in the field, with female students (at least four of Pollard’s interviewees describe sexual advances that made them feel harassed, scared, or very uncomfortable; Archambault also describes several uncomfortable gendered scenarios in her article); it may be even more difficult to discuss possible harassment with male students.

Another gendered aspect of pre-fieldwork training and fieldwork support are the aforementioned tropes of hardship in the field. Some of the classic accounts of fieldwork portray an intrepid, lone, male adventurer-anthropologist, and although a good range of other types of fieldworker images and accounts are now readily available, the “manly” image of a novice anthropologist who becomes a member of the guild once he has “survived” fieldwork may still hold considerable sway. At least

one of Pollard's interviewees explicitly states that she felt pressured to conform to this image. Her fieldwork led her to become ill with overwork. Two further examples are given: one male supervisor explicitly drew on the same imagery, telling his female student that she was not doing "proper" fieldwork because she would not undertake a strenuous journey while she was recovering from dengue fever; and a male student was made to feel he was not doing "proper" ethnography by his female supervisor when he felt unable to participate in a physically challenging all-night ceremony just after he had come out of hospital.

Indeed, several of Pollard's interviewees express a surprising degree of shame because they felt that they were not doing fieldwork "properly" – and their latent definition of "proper" fieldwork seems to be a sustained period of fieldwork in which the researcher spends every waking hour on research activities, disregards his or her own physical and mental health, and never takes holidays or breaks from the field. One might wonder where such an image comes from, why some supervisors feel compelled to uphold it, and why some students internalise it.

On this topic, Delamont suggests that there is "widespread agreement" among social anthropologists in the UK that "the survival of the misery and bafflement of fieldwork is the best way to see who is, and is not fit to join the culture [of UK social anthropologists]". She goes on to reflect on why the PhD students whom she interviewed in 1990 seemed to have "understood" this, while the PhD students interviewed by Pollard had not all "recognised and accepted that reality". However, if there has indeed been any kind of shift over the last two decades, from the time when Delamont did her research to the time that Pollard did her interviews, I for one would be inclined *not* to take this, as Delamont does, as a sign that Pollard's interviewees are "not yet fully socialised", but rather as a more promising marker of how the masculinist trope of needing to "survive" fieldwork is now being critiqued through the practices and thoughts of at least some current PhD students, including Pollard herself.

Fieldwork support: the importance of preparation

What then of pre-fieldwork training and fieldwork support? Pollard certainly seems right to state clearly that: "The evidence of this study, albeit limited in its scope, suggests that pre-fieldwork training courses for PhD anthropologists may be inadequate. It suggests that supervisors cannot and do not always provide appropriate support." It is no surprise that pre-fieldwork training courses are very difficult to design well. Anthropology departments have to contend with funders' requirements regarding methods courses, different kinds of administrative pressures on PhD supervisors, and the acknowledgment that fieldwork today spans an extremely wide range of "fields". As Mills points out, "field research has, if anything, become more methodologically and politically complicated". And it is true, as Okely points out, that students can never be "fully prepared" for fieldwork – this would defeat some of the open-endedness of the method; "there are creative discoveries to follow through". But to recognise this is not the same as assuming that fieldwork has no commonalities; as Okely also states, it does. Assuming then that students can be prepared to some extent, what kind of preparation would be most useful to them? It seems to me that three points emerge from Pollard's study and the responses to it.

First, the main criticism of pre-fieldwork courses voiced by Pollard's interviewees was that the courses were *overly theoretical*. At least one interviewee mentions that this led her into premature analysis, and several others speak of not having been given sufficient opportunity to reflect on the data-gathering process itself: what kind of data should be gathered, how much data is enough, at what point should analysis start, etc. Several state that their pre-fieldwork viva (oral defence) was also mainly theoretical. They were, as Pollard says of one student, "under-prepared for fieldwork, and over-prepared for theoretical analysis".

Second, after reading Pollard's study, it seems important that pre-fieldwork preparation gives students the confidence to *take adequate care of themselves* while in the field, especially if confronted with physical or mental health issues, or physical, sexual or emotional harassment from informants. Taking care of oneself includes taking breaks from the field. Pre-fieldwork preparation should alert students to the fact that fieldwork is a method that commonly triggers feelings of culture shock, loneliness, frustration, and anxiety, to name a few. Students need to be able to discuss which types of difficulties might be productive as part of the research process, which might be debilitating, and how to take care of themselves when dealing with them.

Third, even though students and their supervisors will not know exactly which difficulties the student may face, it is still possible to prepare well for them. A key insight into pre-fieldwork preparation is the idea, put quite simply by Mills, that PhD students are better equipped to deal with whatever challenges they may face if they have built *a web of support*, rather than relying on just a couple of helping hands, such as their pre-fieldwork methods course and the relationship with their supervisor. A methods course and a supervisor may form nodes within a larger web of support that might also include the student's peers, friends, family, and any necessary professional contacts – whether legal, financial, medical, psychological, or otherwise – at the university or outside. Being aware of the need to actively build a web of support, and flexibly draw on it as needed is, as Mills puts it, "as important as any number of ticked boxes and course attendances". A strikingly encouraging example of how a student might actively construct a web of support before going on fieldwork is the case of Poppy, described early in Pollard's article.

Pollard suggests that a mentoring system may add a valuable strand to PhD students' support networks, and Mills and Barry both discuss this idea favourably, adding their own thoughts and references on how mentoring might work in practice.

Another idea on how to develop better networks is the Scottish Programme of Advanced Training in Social Anthropology, STAR (www.san.ed.ac.uk/studying_social_anthropology#star). This is a cross-Scotland initiative, run over four days at a hotel in the highlands. The pre-fieldwork course involves post-fieldwork students too, and allows students to address the issues they feel are important to them. It allows a strong network of PhD researchers to develop.

Finally, it must be mentioned that post-fieldwork seminars should be regarded as an important extension of supporting students through the research process, as fieldwork experiences are worked through and analysed. For example, a significant number of Pollard's interviewees report that, post-fieldwork, they felt they had not gathered enough material. This is a common feeling associated with the difficulty of "leaving behind" the field and embarking on the overwhelming task of writing up a thesis (O'Hare 2007). Candid discussions about such difficulties may prove helpful.

References

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