

## Familiar screams: a brief comment on “Field of screams”

By Sara Delamont (Cardiff University)

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I read anthropology at Cambridge, and have worked in the border country between anthropology, sociology and educational research since 1968. Twenty years ago, with Paul Atkinson and Odette Parry I did research on doctoral students in social anthropology (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry 2000). I teach fieldwork methods to doctoral students in social science every year.

Five things strike me about “Field of screams”.

1. The misery and incomprehension expressed by the informants is vivid, but it is not new. Classic “autobiographical” texts such as Bowen (1954), Barley (1983) and Chagnon (1968) made all these points forcibly. We collected exactly similar stories in 1990. The paper does not report any evidence that these novice anthropologists had read any of that literature. If they had not read any of the classic, or more recent (e.g. Lareau and Shultz 1996) accounts of fieldwork, my question is, *why not?* There is a big literature out there that would have helped these students realise they are not alone, and not idiots.
2. The paper does not report any informant using any of the excellent texts on how to do fieldwork, how to write field notes, how to analyse field notes, how to interview, how to collect genealogies, how to reflect, and how to write, that now exist. If *none* of them used *any* of the resources available, *why not?*
3. The author does not use any of the research on anthropology doctoral students to embed her own data; or any of the published autobiographies by anthropologists to amplify them. That impoverishes the paper.
4. The research that has been done on social anthropologists in the UK higher education system regularly reveals a constant feature of the *habitus* of UK anthropology that Pollard’s informants are not reported to have understood (yet). The *habitus* of the discipline of anthropology relies on a widespread agreement that not everyone can be an anthropologist, and 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. Metaphors of “ordeal by fire”, and being “thrown in at the deep end” abound. The doctoral candidates we interviewed in 1990 understood that, and had internalised it: they shared that world-view, even if they had themselves “failed” the test. Pollard’s informants do not all seem to have recognised and accepted that reality: so they are not yet fully socialised or enculturated into anthropology.
5. The collection of narratives of incompetence and misery from ethnographies has a long history, and it is 20 years since Clifford and Marcus (1986) raised important

questions about the rhetoric of anthropology. Pollard does not pay sufficient attention to the performative and rhetorical nature of such accounts of fieldwork (Atkinson 1990).

## References

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## About the author

Sara Delamont teaches in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. Her books include *Appetites and identities: An introduction to the social anthropology of Western Europe* (1994), *The doctoral experience: Success and failure in graduate school* (with P. Atkinson and O. Parry, 2000), *Fieldwork in educational settings: Methods, pitfalls and procedures* (2nd ed, 2002), *Supervising the doctorate* (with P. Atkinson and O. Parry, 2004), and *Handbook of ethnography* (edited with P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, J. Lofland and L. Lofland, 2001, paperback 2007). Her research interests centre on the sociology of education, sociology of the professions including science, qualitative methods, and capoeira: habitus and embodiment. She can be contacted at [delamont@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:delamont@cardiff.ac.uk).