Silenced?

By David Mills (University of Oxford)

Humbled. That was my first reaction. Humbled by this raw account of fieldwork's demands and the discipline's seemingly inadequate response. The next was anger. Anger at the institutional silences and silencing that continue to make such *cris-de-coeur* so necessary. My third reaction was slightly more productive. I came away with a sense of cautious enthusiasm about both the practical strategies that Amy Pollard offers, and the sorts of debates and consciousness-raising this piece might provoke.

This account is not the first such disciplinary call-to-account, nor should it be the last. Writing about the lack of preparation, support and useful training one receives is almost an established biographical trope in anthropology. That makes Pollard's "evidence-based" indictment no less powerful, but does mean that there is a risk of "*déjà vu, déjà connu*" amongst the professoriate. Once upon a time this trope was expressed through black humour or cynical asides about the fact that one's "training" had simply amounted to being told to buy mosquito-proof trousers. But those jokes have worn flat. The sins of the elders are no defence for continued complacency.

And hadn't this all changed over the last quarter-century? What happened to the "professionalisation" promised by institutionally approved research methods training? And the introduction of ethical approval procedures and risk-management protocols? I think this piece shows that field research has, if anything, become more methodologically and politically complicated. Even the most innovative approaches to research training are hard-pushed to keep up with the changing demands and exigencies of research practice. This is why one's peers, support networks and the personal bonds developed with the supervisor are as important as any number of ticked boxes and course attendances. This complexity may also be one of the reasons for the gradual drift away from a commitment to extensive fieldwork, at least within the US academy.

The paper leaves the discipline with many unanswered questions. But it also has some silences of its own. I would have been interested to know more about the "counterfactuals". How and when were research difficulties, as Pollard puts it, "actually very good for their projects"? Without wishing to rationalise such feelings as functional through being intellectually generative, the coding covers a gamut of bodily experiences – from the everydayness of "disappointment" to the extremes of "depression". If our bodies are part of our research selves, then feelings and emotions are an integral ethnographic research tool. Pollard's research did not set out to document the highs that potentially accompany the lows, but the overall shape of this emotional roller-coaster might be worth exploring further.

Reading the account, one gets a sense that these feelings and emotions were inward-looking, and there was surprisingly little anger or frustration with the institutional practices structuring these feelings. Indeed, many seem to be internalising this disciplining, and blaming themselves. This highlighted for me the importance of Poppy's account. It shows just how far dedicated and politically attuned supervisors can (and should?) go to anticipate and pre-empt difficulties. But this is likely to be the exception. Whilst Pollard insists that she has no intent to apportion blame, the piece does raise particularly challenging questions for current supervisory practice, especially given the many other competing demands on supervisors' time.

There is a growing literature on doctoral education. Sara Delamont, Paul Atkinson and Odette Parry are sociologists who have conducted ethnographic research on anthropology. Drawing on Bernstein, the educationalists' Durkheim, they note how, for anthropologists, the "field is likely to be treated as 'sacred' through a social mechanism of displacement and separation" (2000:175), such that the existential stakes during this liminal and isolated period are inevitably heightened. They go on to note that for those students "whose fieldwork does not yield the right kind of material [...] such problems are likely to be treated as personal or moral failure" (ibid). This might explain the rhetoric of self-blame among Pollard's students. More recent work on the doctoral journey amid a changing institutional landscape is offered by McAlpine et al (2008, 2009) and the inaugural issue of the online journal *International Journal for Researcher Development* (which can be accessed at www.researcherdevelopmentjournal.org).

Are our American counterparts as invested in fieldwork as British anthropologists still seem to be? Whilst hardly the authorised representative of the diversity of US anthropologists, George Marcus is in a powerful position to influence professional practice in that field. He has repeatedly argued for a "serious rethinking of the professional culture of method which operates more by aesthetics than technique" (2007:353), suggesting that within the US, a period of fieldwork no longer serves as a symbolic rite of passage into a disciplinary career. Asking "where have all the tales of fieldwork gone", he concludes that "research may no longer be very ethnographic in the traditional way that it is imagined", and that "fieldwork engagements and collaborations in new areas of research are far deeper and more complex than envisioned by the traditional Malinowskian paradigm" (2006:115). Marcus has been helped in this regard by a decade of work that has sought to "decentre" the field as a site of ethnographic practice (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

I have recently been involved in a research project exploring experiences of doctoral training and "preparation for academic practice" across the social sciences (funded by the Oxford Centre of Excellence in Preparation for Academic Practice, see www.learning.ox.ac.uk/cetl.php?page=208). Our research, and much of the work within the field of doctoral education, has highlighted the importance of developing and utilising networks of support amongst peers, family and friends. The supervisor is only one node within this larger web. One of our emergent policy findings echoes Pollard's conclusions. Recognising that those conducting fieldwork were particularly likely to experience isolation, we recommend that students "draw on the existing expertise among other research students, research staff and academics to minimise isolation, to get the most out of their fieldwork experience, to properly plan their fieldwork, to forestall potential difficulties and to equip them with a range of options to cover different eventualities". We also suggest that students are helped to deal with the experiences of "re-entry".

With this evidence in mind, the idea of formal mentoring peer-to-peer arrangements seems a good one. But what of the practicalities of a mentoring scheme? Mentors can play highly influential roles, and so need to be carefully selected. They also need training and support. This means significant institutional commitment to such programmes. And are students just returning from fieldwork always best placed to provide this informed, non-judgmental support? Might post-docs or recent doctoral graduates now employed outside the university be another resource? A different approach might be to encourage peer-mentoring schemes – with research students organised into reading groups or support networks, keeping in touch with each other during fieldwork. There is no one "right" answer, and the *Journal of Mentoring and Tutoring* publishes work on a variety of different approaches to mentoring (e.g. Driscoll et al 2009, Harris et al 2009).

What of the sensitivities of departmental power relations that make students reluctant to question the status quo or to risk being seen as stirring up trouble? Pollard's aspiration that mentors would "have as little power as possible" over their mentees may not be realistic or even wise. Mentors need to have the confidence and legitimacy to feedback their mentees' concerns and experiences to those responsible for graduate training. Unless mentors can speak on behalf of one cohort, things cannot be improved for the next. And the silences will grow ever louder.

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About the author

David Mills is a university lecturer in the Department of Education at Oxford. After reading for a doctorate in anthropology at SOAS, he held lectureships at Oxford (in Development Studies), Manchester (in Anthropology) and Birmingham (in Cultural Studies). Between 2000 and 2006 he worked for C-SAP, the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics, part of the Higher Education Academy. He is the author of *Difficult folk: A political history of social anthropology* (Oxford, Berghahn 2008).