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

By Sara Delamont (Cardiff University)

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


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, A. Coffey, J. Lofland and L. Lofland, 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.
After visiting Field of Screams for Halloween in October 2020, we definitely wanted to check to the Christmas Twist version being offered on December 12. We bought our tickets online and chose the 6:30 visiting time. We arrived a little early which we were admitted right away. We live about 3 hours away and normally we spend our time in October at Halloween Haunt at King's Dominion, which is currently closed during the pandemic. So, we started researching for some place different to try. We stayed at a Hampton Inn in York, PA (highly recommend) which was less than 30 minutes from Field of Screams. Once we arrived near the venue, they had people directing traffic which was helpful. Getting to our parking space was easy but it was a VERY long walk to the gates with very little signage. I would consider Field of Screams, located in Pennsylvania has really scared the toot out of me, ha! This event or should I say exhibit is held every ... Let me tell you in brief for where I had been to. The whole of us went for most of the major haunts and those were the Den of Darkness, which cost $10, Haunted Hayride, $12 and Little Screamers, around $10. There was another one, where I couldn’t remember so well - something Asylum, which also costs $10. All of these were truly fabulous and I was really scared out of my mind. The attractions really didn’t disappoint us and we were entertained really. I will not be the one to spoil the fun for you, but here are a few of what I could say. If you have a fear for things like clown and stuff like that, then I would advice you to steer clear from the Asylum. Scream! Audio and informatics researchers are perhaps quite familiar with retrieval systems that try to analyse recordings to identify when an important word or phrase was spoken, or when a song was played. But I once did some collaboration with a company who did laughter and question detection, two audio informatics problems I hadn’t heard of before. But one of the most detailed analyses of screams was conducted by audio forensics researcher and consultant Durand Begault. The test screams were generated by asking female subjects to scream as loudly as possible, as if you had just been surprised by something very scary. Thirty screams were recorded, ranging from 123 to 102 decibels.