

COMMENTARY

Young Scholars Forum: Commentary: Opportunism, perspective and insight

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Serendipity... I personally never expected to be discussing this topic. I have not conducted research on serendipity, and it is new for me to be discussing serendipity under the rubric of a category called 'young scholar'. This is not a category I had previously considered. To start with my conclusion, I want to argue that it is not mere chance that we have these two items to consider together. It is precisely the term serendipity that will lead us to the heart of the contradictions of being a young scholar in anthropology today.

Our starting point is the following: What do we expect of a young scholar? Other things being equal, we have become used to the association of older with more established and more conservative, while being young is associated with the ideal of innovation and originality—someone who changes what is going on. To be innovative, maybe even radical, is now so strongly associated with youth that it is as a burden placed on being young. However, as Giabiconi points out, this is a rather problematic expectation, particularly within anthropology, because young scholars, PhD-students or post-doctoral researchers, are working within the specific career structure of anthropology where they have to apply to departments for work. With the rise of audit culture, however, these departments are even less inclined to take risks that they used to do, and are increasingly conservative when hiring new staff. Giabiconi quotes from what George Marcus calls 'the predicament of graduate dissertation research' (2010: 70). It is 'the bind of graduate students caught between the appeal of second projects of established professors and the traditional paradigm of ethnography still in force as the training model' (Marcus 2002: 198).

Let us take, as an example, the genre of writing an academic paper. Actually, anthropology as a discipline is conservative in this respect. We may produce hundreds of journal papers every year across many journals, but there is very little difference in their form and nature. We expect that the introduction will lay out the established state of play with some sort of literature review—although now it is common to have maybe a page of ethnography first to set the scene. We can guess roughly what proportion of the paper will be direct citation, how much is on methodology, what sorts of conclusions we anticipate. So should young scholars be different? Should I be saying it would be good for them to be more distinct and separate from this genre? If they were my students, I would say: 'Definitely not'. Why is that? It is because they are young. They need to establish their reputation in being able to do these conventional things well.

The person who can afford to experiment with new styles of writing is the established scholar. My recent books have tried out writing through portraits of individuals or even inventing academics who argue with each other. But this is not because I am more inventive than a young scholar is. The reason is structural. If someone reads these books and

concludes that I am shallow, or that I am not a real anthropologist or simply that my work is rubbish, I probably will not lose my job. And even I protect myself with more conservative journal articles. The point is that we have the inverse position, where a senior academic can afford to take risks, while a young scholar cannot.

The example that Giabiconi reflects upon is the ideal of reflexivity that arose with the critique of conventional ethnography. As she notes, this is something established scholars such as Clifford Geertz did, but only at the end of their career. All three articles seem to regard the book *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) as a moment of liberation. They are correct, it was an essential critique. But my memory is that it was also something of a disaster at the time for graduate students. My recollection is that this was the period in my department when more PhD-students failed to complete their theses and were least successful at obtaining jobs in anthropology. They wrote about their ethical dilemmas, their existential crises and their attempt to evade authority under post-modernism. Ironically, it may have been the one period when we really did exploit our informants. We undertook fieldwork promising to speak to their issues and experiences, which we then betrayed because in the end we largely wrote about ourselves instead. But again, the key point was that while established academics could afford this self-indulgence and requisite critique, it proved much more of a handicap to young scholars.

So, we start with this paradox: the very people who most want to innovate and have this burden of expectation that they will innovate find that they are not in a position to do this. I think, though, that Giabiconi has part of the solution, when she talks about the idea of an 'academic self'. Because surely this is true, fieldworkers are not present with indigenous populations or refugees in their personal capacity. They are present as prototypes of the professional anthropologist. Most likely, they are there in some measure as a Latourian, Godelierian or Bourdieurian as well. Giabiconi talks of the problems of obtaining funding, but if you are successful, there is also the responsibility that goes with funding. You are paid to be an academic self, obtaining the qualification for a job.

Giabiconi's argument leads to Le Courant, because he happens to have an ideal situation within which to see himself as an academic self. He is exposed to this by the ambiguity of his situation in which he was also 'there' as a legal advocate. The question is first posed to him by the radical alterity, not of anthropology, but of a very strange legal system. Legal assistants seem empathetic, as they argue totally from the perspective and interest of the client. But this also seems shockingly immoral since they must do this equally for the innocent and the guilty, denying their own personal ethics and working entirely according to the parameters of the legal system. As Le Courant shows, this creates an analogy with anthropology. When we use a population analytically, when we say we do not want to be judgmental, is that also a form of dehumanising, a refusal of our own ethical engagement? The dilemma is brought out by his examples of the liar and the lunatic. Are we engaged in trying to see the world from their perspective or is our notion of objectivity, like the law, transcendent? Yet, analytical distance works. Actually, refugees do not gain a whole lot from a nice sympathetic person who tells them he or she feels for their plight. They want a clever lawyer who can give them rights they would otherwise be denied. Similarly, anthropology will not reward you merely for being nice. It will reward you for developing a profound understanding of their situation and its structural nature, even if this goes against their own representation of their experience.

So far, we see that the category of young scholar involves two paradoxes. They are supposed to be innovative but cannot be. Giabiconi wants them to be reflexive, but finds they have instead to put this to one side of their academic selves. A third paradox is even more fundamental. If their findings are innovative in substance, who gets the credit? A young scholar such as Dalsgaard goes to Melanesia. Perhaps, like Ian Hogbin, they discover an extraordinary tribe, the men who copy menstruation by bleeding their penises. But where lies

the innovation? It is not the student; they did not create this cosmology. It was the innovation of the tribe. It is very unusual for anthropologists to admit to this element of serendipity as these articles have. Was it mere chance that the tribe was interesting? Gregory Bateson did fieldwork twice. The first did not work out and he could not find anything of sufficient interest. He tried again and discovered something he could find deeply interesting and then became famous. Most of us are not that lucky anymore to have a second chance.

So, by now the category of young scholar sounds like something from tragedy. They cannot be innovative or reflexive, or claim credit for what they have discovered. So what can they do?

These three articles have, I think, discovered the answer to this crucial question by deciding to focus upon the concept of serendipity. But I want to suggest that this is actually the wrong word. Serendipity is a nice term, with friendly benign connotations. I can afford to be less nice and so I shall. I think it is the wrong word because it refers to chance itself. When actually what these articles are considering as the credit due to the young scholar is not chance, but rather the way young scholars should respond to chance. The correct word for this is really opportunism, something that has much more negative connotations but I think is truthful. After empathy, the greatest virtue of anthropology may be precisely opportunism. Opportunism is radical because there is yet another paradox. These days, to get a grant you more or less have to claim you already know what you will find. We often have an upgrade system in which students give details of what they will do. But the very essence of anthropology is the opposite of this. I tell my PhD students that if they do the research that they planned, and write about in their upgrade, it suggests they may not be very good students. The true originality lies in those things they will encounter in the field, they could not write about in their upgrade, simply because they could not know those things were even there. These are, by definition, entirely original, genuine discoveries. We expect they will turn their attention to those things that no one previously was aware of. So, the paradox is that a thesis should never be that which it set out to be, because that would reveal the failure of the young scholar to be sufficiently opportunistic. I have a current PhD-student who went to Syria to study heritage. She went to Syria. After three months, she emailed me and said she would like to change her topic to the study of heritage in the context of civil war. I said: 'Yes, please do'. You cannot plan to study a civil war, but you can recognise that this is an opportunity you should take precisely because you cannot plan it. While Dalsgaard and Le Courant discuss these changes in relation to the experience of fieldwork, Giabiconi is perhaps more honest in noting that this serendipity often occurs even at the point of the original choice of topic and tells a good story of how she came to her particular field engagement.

In fact, we can go further in the light of these three articles and admit that opportunism is almost another word for what we could have called 'sensitivity'. I do not know what method is right for ethnography because it has to be changed according to what I find out about the population I am working with. All good anthropology is opportunistic, which then means, as these articles show, that it has its own temporality. Le Courant talks of oscillation, I think as a method the conventional term is now 'iterative', that there is a dialectic of experience and consolidation as we take into account what we did not expect to be working on.

So, now we are moving from what a young scholar cannot do to what they can and should do. But what is this opportunism trying to achieve? Alone, it is not enough. There is another criterion, perhaps that which is most commonly used to determine who should or should not get a job. It is the question of how far the student has the ability of original insight. All these articles show insight. Let me use the example of Dalsgaard. He provides an ideal illustration of this process. Perhaps others before him have made points about seeing the field site in relation to time rather than place. But for me, this was the first time the idea has come across with this clarity and plausibility. While it takes from the parochialism of his particular

situation, it is a point that could apply to almost any anthropologist. Furthermore, I think a good original insight like this may be thought of like a virus. Now that I have heard Dalsgaard, I am thinking his thought: 'Yes, fieldwork is critically a matter of temporality and length of engagement'. I cannot unthink this now I have heard him and I will go on and spread this idea to others, hopefully crediting him as the source of my infection.

Yet, we are still missing a stage in understanding what a young scholar can do. We have the opportunism that comes from their stress on serendipity, we have the ideal of original insight, in this case, a sense of temporality that has also arisen from this consideration of serendipity. But what links the two together? I think the answer is laid out very clearly by Le Courant. As he notes, the crucial task in responding to serendipity is the agreement to radically change one's perspective, to allow the field experience to reframe one's encounter and to see things within this new light. Only then is one likely to gain the original insight that is one's gift to the discipline.

In summary, it is no coincidence that young scholars focus on the issue of serendipity. As the three articles clearly demonstrate, the very category of young scholar is beset by paradoxes, which in many ways is severely constraining them from that which they would wish to achieve. However, there is a way of escaping from these paradoxes, namely through reappraising the role of opportunism. If young scholars are prepared to change their perspectives in the light of the experience of fieldwork, then they can still achieve the goals of the academic self, original insights that will inform anthropology and help us all to progress in the future.

References

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