

## Confronting Positionality

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### Abstract

Drawing on a multiplicity of learning, teaching and educational experiences, I argue that understanding positionality, or the specificity of each individual, triggers necessary unlearning. Confronting hitherto hidden, subjective knowledge may be the means to recognize grounded learning as ethnocentric and time and space specific. The individual may learn positionality through unexpected contrast, especially through anthropology. The anthropologist is the participant observer, analyst and writer - no managerial delegator, but directly engaged. Learning through engaged action, anthropologists unlearn what they have consciously and unconsciously absorbed from infancy. New embodied knowledge is often gained through making mistakes in other unknown contexts, thus fostering unlearning. This article explores the above themes through an autobiographical account of experiences of both teaching and learning.

### Introduction

Elaborated awareness of past experience, when faced with contrast, challenges embedded assumptions. Then these assumptions can be theorized rather than dismissed as idiosyncratic. The individual may also learn positionality through unexpected contrast, especially through anthropology. Anthropologists unlearn what they have consciously and unconsciously absorbed from infancy (Okely 2007a). New embodied knowledge, especially in fieldwork, is often gained through making mistakes, thus unlearning what is taken for granted in the individual's primary culture. This is what many anthropologists have regularly discovered (Okely 2012b): they can only learn the rules in new contexts when they brake these rules. Cumulatively learned cultural specificities become authoritative knowledge because they are directly experienced through body, mind and imagination. I argue here that in order to understand difference, the individual learner needs to be fully aware and grounded in self-awareness to what has been learned, and even imposed, through childhood and beyond. This self-awareness of, for example, gender, class, ethnicity, family, personality and age has been explored as positionality or standpoint theory (Harding 1986). Confronting the positionality of the learner as a means of moving outwards demonstrates that reflexivity leads to an understanding of difference, "others," opposites and alternatives. It is a classic, commonplace lesson for students of anthropology to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar – to learn that anthropology can problematise both the presumed exotic as well as the seemingly known. We cannot understand the strange until we have become critically aware of the familiar. Exploring the inner self and, if necessary, unraveling the unconscious core, may be troubling, but it is the route to knowing the full range of human possibilities - the subject of social anthropology, and the object of unlearning. The positionality of the anthropologist has crucial significance in terms of how the fieldworker relates to people s/he encounters and how knowledge is created from this encounter (Okely and Callaway 1992). Here I apply this process to experiences of teaching and learning. The examples commence with my own early childhood. I emphasise the struggle of the individual who is subject to powerful forces of socialization but for whom self-development may crucially entail rejecting what some adults or the larger system would impose. The child, then becoming an adult, may be "trained" and "encultured" into the role of a seemingly passive or trusting learner. The cases here explore

the process whereby creativity and originality, ideally crucial to knowledge, are formed through unlearning what was presumed learned. Unlearning, by definition, entails confronting what has already been learned, whether enforced or naively absorbed, so that it may later be problematised.

### **Childhood Unlearning: Parent or Monarch?**

I commence with a series of anecdotes from my childhood and schooling. It is increasingly recognized that stray words and phrases uttered to children may have life lasting impact. This applies especially to statements made by those with authority and power over children. Adults making isolated utterances may not realise the significance in what they might have thought to be mere passing asides. Here teachers and guardians have massive power. I first draw on my subjective experience, repeating lost utterances which, as with so many other children, may have changed the individual's life.

When giving a lecture about anthropology to some school children in the National Association for Gifted Youth, a schoolgirl of Asian descent asked me "when did you first become an anthropologist?" I gave a very shortened version of the example below: it was when I learned that the boarding school culture in which I was to be indoctrinated from the age of 9 to 18 was something I despised. Within hours of my being told that my father had died, I was weeping on my dormitory bed at the boarding school where my sister and I had been dispatched when our father became paralysed with polio. Initially we were told he "had flu." The austere uniformed matron asked me why I was crying. I said: "My daddy has died." Her reply: "I know. But you *must* stop crying. You will keep the other girls awake." In that regime one of the worst crimes was to be caught "talking after lights out." It merited a disobedience mark. A second disobedience would mean evening detention (Okely 1996). On another occasion, risking all by creeping out of bed, I whispered comfort to a weeping friend whose grandfather had died. He was her substitute father, residing near the school. Her parents lived in Kenya and she saw them every two years. Her grief spiraled. She was dispatched to a mental hospital.

Some time after these respective losses, our teacher called the class together, warning that she had "terrible news." We juniors were terrified. The sobbing, near shrieking woman informed us that "The King has died." Confronted by this usually authoritative, now broken woman, we confused girls learned that we were expected to cry at the loss of this remote figurehead. The girls reacted as a group in moderated crowd hysteria, but in this case, displaying the semblance of weeping or repressed giggling. Recently, a woman from Eastern Europe gasped at my story. Hitherto, she thought it was only under communism, that such political power, disguised as spontaneous emotion, was imposed. When Stalin died, she said, people were expected to weep or howl in public. Such enforced hysteria was to be repeated when the "great leader" of communist North Korea died in 2011. Thus the potential anthropologist learned the priorities of this brutal pedagogic regime which demanded the suppression of individual, personal emotion for the most important adult in a child's life, but required absolute deference to his Majesty, King of the British Empire, on which we were told, in geography lessons, the sun would never set. This culture was the epitome of the English "stiff upper lip," in the face of personal tragedy, but which simultaneously demanded fake emotion for our great ruler. Paradoxically, the future Queen was herself expected to show no emotion in public at her father's death.

That school was to enhance our cultural, not intellectual, capital, as in Bourdieu's analysis of French education (1990), but in the English case, as social and biological reproducers of the upper class. English cultural capital prioritized manner of speech, or "accent" and demeanor. Arriving from a village school, I had to unlearn my "local" Lincolnshire accent and looped writing, which the teacher denigrated as that of a "maid." Thus even handwriting had to be unlearned. The ideal for school leavers was to be presented as debutante to the Queen and attend "Finishing School" in Switzerland. University was confined to those considered unmarriageable. One girl with a facial birthmark was therefore encouraged to attend university. She eventually became an ambassador. The preference was training either at a "posh" secretarial college or as a nurse, (never a doctor), in select hospitals, such as St Thomas' in London. The school magazine

reproduced a photograph of the Queen presenting a former pupil the prize for the best nurse at this elitist hospital.

Back to the anthropologist's learning through an opposing response to trauma. Retrospectively, it is possible that the matron's pitiless command was the moment I became an anthropologist who learned to hate this mono/cultural confinement which prepared women of a certain class as submissive helpmates to future colonial rulers. A psychotherapist once suggested that after the rebuke for crying over the death of the person closest to me, all that remained of the child's meaningful world was then interiorized and secreted from the institution's authoritarian gaze (Foucault 1977). I learned to question what was presented as "proper" education. I unlearned what was supposed to be learned from those designated mentors. The child retreated into a hidden inner space that no matron could penetrate - and hence a long lasting interest in subjectivity and autobiography (Okely 1986; Okely and Callaway 1992). Such interiority is recognised in recent studies by the psychotherapist Schaverien who has proposed a cluster of symptoms classified as "Boarding School Syndrome" (Schaverien 2011; Monbiot 2012). She outlined the trauma of the "privileged" child, with examples her from therapeutic practice (Schaverien 2004). In contrast to many victims of the syndrome, this child, then adult author, turned her anger to an escape into alternative cultures.

Paradoxically, the school already offered living alternatives of cultures from around the world, in contrast to what was supposed to be a British isolate. It boarded the children of international elites, not only of British colonials in Africa, but the offspring of families in Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Caribbean, Hong Kong, Sweden, Portugal and France (Okely 2012a). Such girls were encultured in deference to a world power in what one Iranian former inmate described as the Master/Slave relationship. Tales of the elsewhere, far from our "imprisonment" in the Isle of Wight, proved enchanting to the English inmate. Mina, from Iran, would whisper Persian phrases and describe the Caspian Sea, in our dormitory at night. A second Iranian, Mimi Khalvati, now a celebrated poet, wrote nostalgically about her years at The Chine (2001). Another good friend, Maria, described to me, with minimal political knowledge, her pride in her uncle who had ruled Portugal for years. Unknowingly, I had befriended the niece of the fascist dictator Salazar. Her foreign accent and different style were an intriguing escape from the banality of a narrowed Britishness.

The French anthropologist Williams (2003) said my final chapter on mortuary rites in *The Traveller-Gypsies* (1983) inspired him to examine such rituals among the French Manouches. I puzzled why I had written that chapter. After anthropological explanations, such as Malinowski's holistic approach, which I had been taught by Edmund Leach, I recognized added psychoanalytical motivations. I was captivated by Gypsy children's total participation at their father's funeral. In contrast to my "own" imposed culture, I learned how other cultures might fully integrate children when faced with tragedy and death (Okely 2008: 67-69), rather than abandon them in confusion and punish them for grieving. Anthropology can, through its multiple cross-cultural examples, defy ethnocentric cruelty and offer strange resolution through revealing the once buried unconscious. Anglican orthodoxy was unlearned through Gypsy contrast.

## **Not University**

My second example of a key statement which I had to unlearn as a schoolgirl was uttered by the Headmistress, when she summoned me to her study. I had 13 "Ordinary" levels, some of which I had passed at the age of 14, when the standard age was 16. I was studying for 4 "Advanced" levels. The Headmistress declared that I "would be selfish to go to university." I would be "depriving a more worthy person of a place, even Aberystwyth." Perhaps my inner rebellion showed in body language. I did not fit in, especially because I hated sport (Okely 1996). Daily hockey or netball was compulsory, with minimum time allotted for private study. The would-be intellectual had to unlearn what the educationalists had judged appropriate. The rebel emerged because she wanted to think. At night, with a secret torch, I would read books under the blankets.

The library was merely a glass-roofed conservatory with three entrance doors, thus a noisy thoroughfare. But it was a sanctuary. When it was bulldozed, I rescued a patterned floor tile as triumphant, sacred object, still in my study today.

In that library, I found a copy of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (1957). This became a key text for dozens of adolescent girls on a par with de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (1949) (c.f. Okely 1986). In contrast to the fearsome cultural conformity of this alleged privileged education, I was introduced to a world of brilliant writers: all explored as outsiders such as Camus, Sartre, T.E. Lawrence, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Blake and T.S. Elliot. I still have that book as talisman of new knowledge and unlearning. The emergent "outsider," in her late teens, dared ask the headmistress for the only single bedroom in the school. There she could read in solitude, although again with a torch after 9 pm. I had to unlearn the traditional English contempt for the intellectual. The inner rebel refused to absorb the teacher's judgment. She had to unlearn what the headmistress had taught. Somewhere in the child's memory from seven years old, were the words of her now deceased father, an Oxford graduate: "I want Judith to go to Oxford."

After nine years incarceration, I escaped to the Sorbonne. My father had a degree in French and German and would fascinate me by translating childrens' French books into English as he read them aloud to me. Independently, in defiance of my teacher, I took the Oxford entrance exam, with success. Thus the Electra legacy of the daughter/father rapport defied the school's lessons. All this is material for the most amateur psychoanalyst. A school, which had forbidden mourning for the father's death, unintentionally instilled its counter-productive learning. The bereaved child internalised a secret pledge to follow the father's distant lessons, which the dominant, brutal system had failed to eradicate.

### **Learning About Learning for Teaching**

The autobiographical accounts thus far give an indication of the author's experiences of unlearning as schoolgirl. I now explore unlearning in broader learning contexts, including university, namely Oxford. As an undergraduate, although of Politics, Philosophy and Economics, I also mixed with historians. My then boyfriend Gareth, was part of a history network, including political mentors such as Raphael Samuel and E. P. Thompson. Samuel moved from London to Ruskin College where we would attend some open events. Those were the days when university education was rarely available to mature students. But through Ruskin and the Trade Union movement, people could do an intensive one-year course before being accepted as second year university student. It could have been intimidating for trade unionists to arrive at Oxford. But Raphael Samuel brilliantly drew on the mature students' long term grounded experience and specialism, instead of intimidating them with detached dates, facts and abstract theories. He encouraged them to commence with their own lived experience and position in history.

At one history workshop, a man described the artisanal skill of making huge wooden beer barrels. Displaying the object, he showed us the complex art of heating or soaking the curving strips of wood and fixing the metal clasps. Others likewise demonstrated their trades. They had been encouraged to look at the changing contexts of the production. Thus, like all the other presenters, some in their 40s and bearing the bodily marks of heavy labour, they were taught that academic learning can be launched outwards from subjective and grounded knowledge. Both they and we the audience unlearned any presumption that manual labour was irrelevant to wider knowledge. Mind and body were enjoined. Lived experience was not incompatible with theoretical knowledge, generalizing or holistic contexts. In the Ruskin/Samuel approach, knowledge and its acquisition was consistent with the celebrated Marxist ideal where multiple skills link hand and brain, body and mind. Many of us were inspired by Jackson's and Marsden's *The Education of the Working Class* (1961). Its power came from the fact that the authors of the study of working class pupils who gained grammar school places were, albeit latently, drawing on their lived experience. Years later, social anthropology's special appeal to me was the embodied knowledge acquired through participatory fieldwork (Okely 2007a, 2009).

With Gareth, I visited E. P. Thompson and Dorothy in Halifax. Thompson had not yet been appointed to a university chair in recognition of *The Making of the English working Class* (1963). He survived on part-time teaching, including the Workers Education Association (WEA) providing evening classes. One day we drove the many miles from Halifax to a small town on the East Yorkshire Coast. The students were middle aged or older working class white men. That evening's theme was "The Chartists" Edward responded with respect and deep thinking to each man's comments. They were encouraged to speak in turn. Some were halting and hardly "academic" But Thompson was listening and learning from their life experience as much as they were being "taught" by him. It took us well over two hours to drive cross country then two hours back for this evening class of less than one and a half hours. Thompson could hardly have been doing it for the money, but instead out of profound commitment. He, as an internationally-acclaimed intellectual who had been to the elite Oxford Dragon school, then, after serving in the Italian campaign, graduated at Cambridge, was also unlearning privileges, reaching out to others' experiential knowledge. He encouraged the men to speak from their grounded reactions, unlearning any stigma of being "uneducated."

After my graduation and the uncertainty of a mediocre degree, I obtained a teaching job at a boys' secondary modern catholic school in Banbury. The headmaster, Mr, Grimshaw, had a postal degree in accountancy when living in Africa. He insisted he could and would show me how to teach. I was asked to sit in his English lesson with the one textbook. The 12 year olds had to choose a suitable word from a selection to complete a blank in each sentence. Mr, Grimshaw asked:

"Who put 'bread is white?'"

Many hands went up.

"Wrong. Bread can be brown."

"Who put 'bread is spongey?'"

Tentative hands went up.

"That's stupid. How can bread be spongey? It is made from flour. No. There's only one thing bread is and that is *wholesome*. There, Miss Okely, now you know how to teach."

Thus Charles Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind survived in Oxfordshire in the "Swinging Sixties." Additionally, if any boy slightly misbehaved, I was told by Mr. Grimshaw that the pupil was to be sent to this headmaster to be caned. After seeing the little red palms on their return, I refrained from such discipline and punishment. This brutal, dogmatically ignorant form of teaching was thus inflicted on the proletariat. In this my first teaching experience, just miles from Oxford's "dreaming spires," such enforced "gavage," (force feeding of geese for the production of pate), was vividly unlearned by myself.

### **Alternative Teachings**

Building on alternative lessons from Samuel and Thompson, through disengagement from hegemony, I re-learned innovative teaching practices in a postgraduate course in Further Education at Garnett College, London. Before their abolition by Thatcher, formal apprenticeships were widespread in multiple trades. Apprentices were given a weekly, one-day release for technical classes. The remaining days entailed working alongside the qualified bricklayer, plumber or hairdresser. Each apprentice had a compulsory slot for "Liberal studies" or general education. Teaching "Liberal Studies" was increasingly popular among left wing graduates. The Liberal Studies textbooks included extracts from classic novels and poetry. We were encouraged to take the students on outside visits.

After qualifying, I gained employment at the Oxford College of Further Education (F.E.). Having arranged a visit to the Cowley Morris Motor factory, I arrived with the day release students and we were treated like VIPs. Over tea and biscuits, we were given a talk before entering the factory floor. One student was especially excited because her father worked on the assembly line. Never having seen this, she was moved that her father's previously invisible work

was part of her college study. The students responded to her flowing narratives of newly created pride. They unlearned any prejudice that manual/factory labour was divorced from college learning.

Another example emerged from the challenge of teaching “O” level Social and Economic history. Many had come from the same authoritarian “Gradgrind” teaching traditions uncovered in Banbury. Some of the students at this Oxford F.E. College were Jamaican born; their parents of an early migrant generation. The course included some references to slavery, though from an economic perspective. I had vague memories of the arrogant, racist way I was taught about slavery at school (Okely 2010; 34-35). My intention, by contrast, was to celebrate the Jamaican students’ positionality in the context of their past and existing potential. The classroom lessons could not pretend that history was addressed only to white British students, in an era when multiculturalism was a distant dream. Racist discrimination was rampant and rarely legally challenged. The aim of encouraging the positionality among students, both white and Caribbean, had to be subtle. I did not directly refer to ancestral slaves but neither was it discussed in a detached date-ridden way. Instead I selected gifted individuals labeled “black” Linking slavery to music, I brought in a gramophone and played Billie Holiday’s “*Strange Fruit*” exposing the horror of racist lynching. Given the Odeon cinema was directly opposite the college, I took the students to an afternoon showing of *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) revealing the legacy of racism in the American South. The intention was to encourage lateral identification among the Jamaicans and deconstruction of stereotypes among the white students.

For a representation of rural historical context, I invited the students to visit my tiny rented 19th century cottage in Appleton village and for a country walk. The excuse was to look at an ancient thatched building with just an outside lavatory, one cold tap and ancient iron range for cooking and heating. Only three students, the Jamaicans, turned up for the car lift. They loved the fields and open country because they said it “reminded” them of “home” - i.e. the rural Jamaica of their childhood. Alienated in urban Cowley, they never left the city, while they were also excluded from any university college grounds. They were not responding to what others would designate a “typical English pastoral countryside,” but their once familiar, now lost Jamaican past. Understanding of the seemingly foreign was acquired by finding comparisons, then contrasts, with positioned, lived experience. They unlearned their English location as only urban.

Ironically, but consistent with the ideal of starting from the familiar, was the very different response by the students to the Odeon filming of Lindsay Anderson’s *IF*, based in a boys’ public school. Replete with absurd discipline and meaningless lessons, brutality was institutionalized. It ended with the rebels shooting at the headmaster and staff from the rooftop. The regime was so alien that in the ensuing discussion that the mainly white working class students did not emerge criticizing this elite system. Some argued that every society needed leaders and that was what public schools were for. Thus deference remained in Oxford among some working class youth in the swinging sixties. This was 1968/69, the years of “Les Evenements” in Paris and when undergraduates at the LSE were tearing down gates as barricades in the name of revolution. My tacit identification with the public school rebels did not resonate with the students for whom such institutions, and therefore any grounded critique, was utterly detached from their life experience. They did not unlearn a prevailing deference to an elitist hegemony. It was only my positionality not theirs which resonated with the film.

### **University contradictions**

My experience during several vacations accompanying my then partner Hugh, engaged in a field study of Western Ireland, opened up the discipline of anthropology, which combined intellectual study with human encounters across all boundaries through participant observation (Okely 2009). After converting to anthropology via a postgraduate course at Cambridge, then fieldwork among Gypsies and studying for a D.Phil., I gained a temporary lectureship at Durham University. I had to unlearn my imagining of this university as a temple of rational knowledge. Sexism was institutionalized. Marriage was taboo because married women were either not shortlisted for any

lectureships or asked by the interview panel if or when they might get pregnant. My married predecessor claimed (incorrectly) that she was barren. The all-male interview panel, noting a feminist publication and that I was the first woman member of the Oxford Union, asked if I would still be interested in the job if I could not teach anything on women. Apparently anthropology was only about men (Okely 2007b).

Nevertheless, in those pre-managerial days, I had complete autonomy in teaching. Lecturers were given just the title of compulsory degree courses. We could devise the reading lists, tutorial topics, essay titles and exam questions, all with total freedom in lectures. Any postgraduate teaching qualification was in those days considered irrelevant. Someone even advised me to delete my experience in FE from any university job application. Nevertheless, for undergraduates, I drew on those fully explored practices developed for day release apprentices. Commencing with subjective positionality, first year students were asked to consider their experience of being in a cultural context different from that to which they were most accustomed. They could discuss this in small groups and report back to the class before expansion in an essay. This method was vindicated by the superb and varied examples provided by students. By describing their mistakes or surprises and revealing personal vulnerability, they learned about difference. They unlearned what they had taken as universal. They were confronted with the lived meaning of ethnocentricity when they unknowingly broke other cultural rules. One woman, for example, described walking alone in a Middle Eastern country. When followed, she gave the man a rude extended stare, believing this would drive him away. But this simple gesture was misinterpreted as a seductive “come-hither.” This exercise proved creative through the years. When I later taught in Hull University, a working class, Yorkshire student, outlined his culture shock in the contrast between his quick use of the shared bathroom facilities at the student residence and the extended time taken by the privileged “southerners.” He considered this a total cultural divide within the UK. He described how “back home, up north” bathroom facilities were so limited that individuals had to be quick. Seemingly affluent southerners were either used to luxury ensembles or wasted too much time “pampering.”

Repeatedly, when I introduce autobiographical examples from fieldwork, students respond by offering their own. Students’ personal narratives prove empowering and lead to contrasts and unlearning what they once took for granted as universally normal. Another use of personal identity resonated in my introductory lecture for this course. I suggested that many of the students who were drawn to anthropology may have parents of different nationalities or ethnicities or they may have lived in more than one culture, possibly speaking several languages. They were fortunate, I argued, since they had learned that one culture was not superior to another. They had a bifocal vision (Okely 2003). Decades later, I had repeated this at Hull where I was appointed to a professorship. A student came to my office several weeks into the Introduction to Social Anthropology. Weeping, she was so happy about the theme of mixed cultural identities. Of Ukrainian origin but born in Hull, she was often cared for by her Ukrainian grandparents. But she was repeatedly bullied at the local school because the children said she was “not real Hull.” “Now,” she said, “you say it is alright!” This example again confirmed the creative and affirmative merit of students being encouraged to confront their positionality with pride. This student had unlearned the bizarre near racism towards persons denigrated and bullied as outsiders.

### **Feminist and Gendered Unlearning**

Back in Durham in the 1970s, the only teaching restriction reflected the patriarchal hegemony. I was advised by a sympathetic colleague, David Brooks, that in no way would the male professor agree to a course containing the word “Women” in the title. Although the content of courses was unrestricted, the title had to be passed by Senate. Apparently, the professor would be embarrassed to be associated with any feminine label. So instead, I suggested “Race and Gender” which no one would dare contest. Self-awareness about racism, nearly a decade after my experience in the College of F.E., was now in the public, politicized domain. Moreover, anthropology contested simplistic racial groupings. Simultaneously, I smuggled in “gender” as a

more neutral label and apparently without the dreaded feminist stigma. In tutorials and class discussions there were superb examples of subjective explorations revealing wider cross cultural alternatives. Surprisingly, a higher proportion of male students registered for “Race and Gender.” An opener was the then relatively novel division between “sex” as biological and “gender” as cultural, minutely elaborated by Anne Oakley (1972). One male student, whose essays earned the highest grades, recounted how he had biologically vital tear ducts but that he had not used them since he was 12 years old because he had learned in his public school that boys don't cry. Thus gendered culture changed biology. He is now an anthropology Professor at Oxford.

Recalling the grounded lessons from Raphael Samuel, I arranged for my neighbours in an examining village to come to the department to talk to students. This was Dick, a retired miner and his wife, Sue. They had never stepped into university premises. None of the students that day had encountered a miner for extended dialogues. It proved an awesome event. For everyone it was fieldwork at home. The majority of students came from privileged southern private schools and had no contact with the local population. The students lived off stereotypes of this classical working class population. The locals were seen only as domestic servants, shopkeepers or barmen. Thus through this unique encounter, I made the students unlearn the “locals” as inarticulate, grubby people who crawled underground. Simultaneously, my mining neighbours experienced the students as engaging and vulnerable. Already, Dick and Sue had been astonished to learn that the Durham Cathedral Tower was locked at examination time lest any stressed students make a suicide leap. They had hitherto presumed students to be rich time-wasters.

## To Conclude

Social anthropology introduces the full range of human cultural possibilities. It has too often been assumed that the process of studying anthropology involves examining only that which is different, if not exotic. Thus individuals and groups may risk believing as commonplace their own conditions and context. What is presumed familiar needs also to be problematised and in the process unlearned for new learning to blossom. Here the individual, just like the fieldworker, may be confronted with his or her specificity from childhood and beyond. This specificity or positionality, once recognized and explored, is a source of comparative strength. Paradoxically, in order to understand, interpret and analyse others, the student, whether potential or actual researcher, benefits from subjective awareness of accumulated lived experience as a means of learning alternative ways of being. The student of anthropology learns about others, taking off from specific grounded knowledge that may then be confidently put to one side. In some contexts, defiant unlearning may take place at an early stage, especially where the pupil is faced with contrary pedagogic values imposed by the powerful. New learning can be inspired by building on the student's prior knowledge and identity as a means of fostering both commonality and contrast.

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