What a Mess! From Cultural Disorientation to Autobiographical Knowing: Ethnographic ‘Failure’ among Himalayan Nomads and the value of Past Participation with Gypsies in the City.

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This presentation questions the often static and categorical construction of positionality in anthropological discourse. In this context, I will focus on the complexity and plasticity of the ethnographic and reflexively experienced self. With regards to this, anthropological accounts of positionality have often employed neat categories, such as, gender, ethnicity and class, to explain why certain topics or perspectives are favoured. In doing so, I suggest that this approach can overlook the extremely complex, and transitory, nature of the subjective self, and the way in which this effects the process of ethnographic research. This seems odd, when one considers anthropology’s commitment to avoid essentialism in relation to our research participants, yet the ethnographer, by accounting for their motives through the employment of neat social categories, essentialises their own complex subjectivity.

To illustrate my perspective, I draw reflexively on examples from my two very different, and what at first seemed to be incommensurable, doctoral research topics. The first of these set out to study the ways in which the Humli-Khyampa, a group of Tibetan nomads, deify the Himalayan landscape in which they live, and how this relates to their economic practices. The latter focusses on Gypsies and Travellers in North East London, and seeks to understand in what kinds of ways collective memory produces a sense of place. The rationale behind this choice was the decades of past participation I had among Gypsies and Travellers, therefore, I was experientially positioned. With regards to these cases, the presentation will focus on what, at first, was experienced as ‘ethnographic failure’, due to the occurrence of having to abandon my Himalayan project. This ‘failure’ left me with feelings of confusion, despair and anger, here I felt that my burgeoning academic career had been destroyed, not to mention wasting eighteen months of hard work. However, while formulating what I thought was a completely new research project, I realised that the experiences of conducting research in the Himalayas had led me to make many insightful cross cultural comparisons. Salient here was, that although the two cases were undoubtedly geographically, historically and culturally distinct, the overall subject matter was largely interchangeable and formed the basis for a new project. Questions and issues that the presentation will consider are: what is the ‘position’ of the ethnographer with regards to the study of an unfamiliar culture? My position as an ethnographer in the Himalayas was as someone who had very little linguistic competence, this meant that my focus was drawn to the Himalayan landscape, which in turn influenced my thinking concerning Gypsies and Travellers in the intense urban environment of London. Therefore, with regards to my position as an ethnographer, how was this achievable? What are the limits of this kind of understanding? Finally, what role, if any, did my class, ethnicity, gender etc. play in my topic of study, the perspectives employed, and the change of research focus?
As well as addressing these questions, the presentation will also explore how cultural incommensurability is bridged in anthropological research, not only through a focus on the complex subjective positionality of the ethnographer, but regarding the role that cognitive/embodied dissonance plays in anthropological learning and knowing. The experience of this caused this practitioner to constantly challenge and reevaluate their core beliefs and understandings about the world. Therefore, rather than the researcher being positioned a priori by their previous lived experience, the ethnographic encounter, as well as the reading of ethnographic and philosophical texts, put this process into reverse. Here the cognitive/embodied dissonance experienced through seeking to understand the ‘Other’, provided new ways of seeing and knowing, something which transformed this researcher’s view of the world.