

“How does your garden grow?” Learning to nurture nature

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In this project I consider contemporary anthropological ideas of knowledge transfer by exploring the experiences of three generations' gardening. I argue that learning is an individual process that is enhanced with the production of physical feedback. I have mimicked the style of Trevor Marchand in his paper '*The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work: studying in the art of furniture making*', by laying out three gardening life histories of my Grandmother's, my Mother's and my own. The process of research is also particularly important to this report as it is essentially an 'auto-ethnography'. As a short-term piece of research it is very limited in its scope of new conclusions but contains a detailed reflection on the fieldwork experience itself as an intimate and transforming experience.

Introduction

Gardens have been studied by anthropologists across the world to reflect on various social practices for a long time. Here in the UK, community gardens are also being recognised for their ability to enhance social cohesion (Kingsley & Townsend, 2006). In my neighbourhood of New Cross we have three community gardens, two sets of allotments and numerous private gardens, some of which are open to the public. I argue with evidence from my fieldwork and support from anthropologists such as Tim Ingold and Trevor Marchand, that in all these locations learning is happening with every interaction, even for 'experts' in gardening, because knowledge is constantly evolving within the individual rather than being passed on in discrete packages between people or as Ingold puts it, 'nothing is really transmitted at all' (2000a: 237). I had the opportunity to spend my research period with my Grandparents in Kent, 'The Garden of England'. During my research, what became important was not why people gardened a spot, but what they learnt there and how they felt doing it. By the end of my fieldwork in Kent my notes were full of scribbles about the changing climate, what grows well where, and how my Tad has adapted different systems for the vegetables. I felt most like I was 'being there' when taking

part in conversations between my Grandmother and my Mother. Several presumptions I had held about Gran's way of gardening were undermined and I saw then, that what I believed had been a direct transmission of gardening knowledge to my mother from her had in fact not happened - Mum had become a gardener of her own accord.

My ethnographic process reflects the theories of 'making knowledge' it concerns; rather than discovering answers to my question in the form of neatly composed 'values', through fieldwork I began to appreciate peoples constantly evolving consciousnesses. I was subject to the sensory overload that comes with 'making knowledge' and discovered all skills, like fieldwork and gardening need to be lived to be learnt.

Methods

In discussing my methods I first feel a need to admit what I did wrong despite being taught not to. I recognised my field, and therefore research, was limited to a very narrow section of society and this might cause problems later but it had not occurred to me that the kind of questions I wanted to ask were ones that my Grandparents might not have answers to. It soon became obvious that it is hard for an informant to pick apart the reasons behind something that they had always done, and that this was probably my job. With hindsight I was also guilty of not being reflexive because I did not consider properly how my role as grandchild would affect in what setting my Grandparents would be most comfortable talking to me. Gran was in fact hesitant to have a formal interview, so most of my observations came from conversation, life-history gathering, and participant observation. As later research I recorded an interview with my mother in Wales. I have found recordings invaluable because there are so many details in conversation that can be missed in recollection. I knew my relationship with Mum would lead me to read several layers into what she was saying and misunderstand some others. She seemed very confident talking with the recorder in front of her but as soon as it was switched off, she started to express concern that 'she wasn't really sure what to say' and that she didn't know 'what I needed'. The presence of the recorder had created the 'awkward space' I hadn't expected from an auto-ethnographic study by implementing a structured

relationship with me as the 'anthropologist' and Mum as 'informant'. We had a second interview when we were both relaxing in the evening and she had had a chance to think about what to say. This longer life-history worked well as a later piece of research – it provided me with confirmation of ideas from my readings but the details were still surprising and rich. This is a benefit of auto-ethnography as after developing my ideas I was able to return to my 'field' quite easily to gather more data.

GRAN

My Grandmother Heather and her husband met in dental training at King's College, London and then took over her parent's dental practice. They were busy working parents with 5 children (then 16 Grandchildren) so the garden has always been a centre for family life. The garden has always provided food - my Grandfather John grows vegetables and when his father lived with them, most of the garden was turned over to veg patches for him to cultivate. Since, John has installed raised beds, a much less labour intensive way of growing. Other adaptations have been made in the garden too, for example the compost bins can be turned with a handle to save digging them over. Whilst I was visiting I cleared the path and did some trimming which was highly appreciated because of 'the hard work'. Perhaps because the last time Heather and John performed these tasks it was very difficult, they have now layered this over the time it was an easy job in their physical memory. Despite it becoming increasingly difficult to get around, Heather still enjoys planting new things and tending to those that are already well established. By account of those that know her she is a font of all knowledge but does not see that herself; she says she is not a 'knowledgeable' gardener like her mother-in-law was because she doesn't know all the names for plants and often just plants things she likes rather than making a garden design. Recently she discovered that double headed daffodils are mutated and do not contain bee attracting pollen. She demonstrates Harris's theory of 'knowing as an ongoing process' instead of 'knowing as certainty' (2007:4 and 12) revealing that there is always more to be learnt given the need.

John and Heather both commented to me daily about the seasonal shifts, or climatic changes that can be seen from the window, for example the lack of

butterflies in Kent now is very noticeable. For them a good garden is one that encourages diverse life and provides a sanctuary for animals (my uncle was chastised for suggesting we eat one of the pheasants that was on the lawn). As the lace-makers in Makovicky's work adapt their movements to what they see in the lace (2010), Heather and John tend to the garden in response to it's growth and what they see in it. I propose their bodily behaviours in providing this environment also reflect their religious internality. Could it be that the decline of positive feedback in the form of insects could be causing Heather's lack of confidence in her skills?

MUM

My Mother Diana also has 5 children and has always gardened because it was 'what you did'. She enjoyed unsuccessful vegetable cultivation in her shared houses as a student and her journey with gardening epitomises Ingold's idea of learning as 'guided rediscovery' (2000b: 356) where novices train their perceptions and actions to become skilled, building from scratch what their teachers have already discovered. With the 70's and Rachel Carson's *'Silent Spring'* came a growing awareness of the affect that modern cultivation had on the planet and since then Di has tried to consider the environmental impact of everything she does, including gardening. This has led her to permaculture – a system of growing based on careful planning and participation with the natural surroundings. Like the current anthropological theories on knowledge production, it is a system designed to reconcile the social and biological aspects of a growing space to produce low labour, high yield designs.



On reflection she can attest her love of growing things to her maternal Grandmother who “loved the world, the planet, and all creatures on it so much, you couldn't help

but be with her in it and feel the same.” Her taste for fresh home-grown vegetables also comes from her childhood and the relationship she has with food is deeply sensory: “I can just picture it now, that smell of touching the tomato leaves.” She remembers all the sights and smells of gardens from her childhood but doesn't directly associate them with her current passion for gardening. Although she was not allowed to interact with the apple trees her Grandfather grew, she has always had an apple tree in her garden and has ambitions to set up an orchard. What has been passed down has not been any *skill* relating to apple growing but the *passion* to grow them in the first place. Is this the first stage of 'making knowledge'? It seems that in biological terms her brain has recognised the pleasures of food growing for a long time and throughout her adult life she has built on this association by seeking further feedback from the plants she grows and the political climate she inhabits. Or as Marchand explains Maurice Bloch's theory, ‘it is not a matter of passing on “bits of culture” as though they were a rugby ball being thrown from player to player. Nothing is passed on; rather, a communication link is established which then requires an act of re-creation on the part of the receiver’ (Marchand 2010: S11).

ME

Like my mother and my Grandmother, I started gardening when I left home. As a beginner I thought I would appear very ignorant during my first conversations with Gran but surprised myself with my level of knowledge. During fieldwork I discovered many conclusions I came to on my own were shared, for example planting mustard seeds as 'green manure' and not using gloves when potting plants in order to not damage the roots. I want to be a 'good' gardener because I worry about where my food comes from and know that 'growing my own' is a good alternative. Since writing this ethnography I have developed my gardening skills and even sought tutelage from a friend on how to deal with certain plants and weeds. Again, I often find myself surprised at how much I can discuss and often lead the conversation even with this much more experienced friends. In this aspect, my fledgling knowledge on gardening is truly 'social knowledge' according to Marchand's theory of social production (2010: S12). By harnessing what my informants tell me and adapting it to my needs, they then change their approach in the telling and we created a body of knowledge

together.

Conclusions

'Making knowledge, after all, is an ongoing process shared between people and with the world.' (Marchand 2010: S1)

To truly know something is impossible because there is always more to discover, so it is through life and in ethnography. By looking at the skill of gardening I have discussed how learning is ongoing because even experienced 'experts' adapt to new circumstances, how learning a skill is a deeply personal and physical process, but the creation of 'knowledge' requires visible or social feedback. I have had a limited field and so have not been able to discuss skills that are developed out of necessity, though I hope my reading has brought some varied examples to my work. I have inadvertently studied phenomenologically because of my apparently familial trait of exploring with my senses and am happy to see different areas of research joined up in the relatively new 'anthropology of knowledge'. The reconciliation of biological and social aspects of how people learn, like all areas, will continue to develop as people bring back new observations from the field. My future investigations will go further into where people get their first 'passion' or 'feeling' for a skill that encourages them to develop it despite discomfort or hardships and I believe that this could in turn be combined with my original intention to explore the value of land as food growing space.

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