Placing Personhood: Ontology, The Life Course, and Cemeteries

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Abstract

This article considers the challenge of teaching the anthropology of personhood to third year sociology and combined honours undergraduates at a British university. It draws on the experiences of the author in developing such a module, and in particular the difficulties of making the theoretical and empirical concepts at stake more tangible to this cohort of students. The article explores one solution, namely a seminar-based fieldwork exercise in a local cemetery. The exercise sought to bring personhood 'into view' in the urban landscape and in everyday practices with a follow-up series of student presentations. The discussion here highlights the theoretical framing of personhood and ontology taken by the module; the dilemmas of finding 'real world' and emplaced sites for the students to try out these ideas; and some of the reflections on teaching personhood via this exercise that resulted for both students and lecturer.

Introduction

The category of the person has long been a keen point of interest for anthropology. This focus has in part been driven by a desire to better understand "who counts as a person and who does not and of which beings therefore belong within the circle of society and which do not" (Carrithers *et al* 2011: 662). Anthropologists have framed such questions as an ontological issue of profound significance for how human beings conduct themselves within the world, how they relate to others, as well as how they understand life itself. Yet how these categories are determined often vary enormously over time and place. In some cultural settings, for instance, being human is not a sufficient indication of personhood. This is because any manner of non-human animals, "inanimate" objects and spirits can also be people, whilst in other settings, not all human beings are entitled to claims of personhood with children, women, the "disabled" (Carrithers *et al* 2011: 662) and slaves (Knight 2005:2) all having been excluded at different moments in time from "the magic circle of personhood" (Carrithers *et al* 2011: 663) itself.

Given the wide-ranging answers historically and cross-culturally to the question of "who counts" as a person, personhood thus presents a powerful opportunity for undergraduate teaching. Firstly, it allows an anthropological consideration of ontology, especially in regards to what it is and why it matters as a grounding feature of alterity. Ontological assumptions about how the world is organised determine categories of being, and thus critically inform cultural notions of "who" and "what" counts as a person. Secondly, it permits a critical examination of how ontological difference is a crucial aspect of cross-cultural enquiry, one that sets particular demands on ethnographers both in the field and when they come to analyse their materials. Finally, personhood offers a dynamic opportunity to consider not only examples of cross-cultural variation, but also to examine assumptions underpinning how and to whom personhood is attributed in the students' own cultural settings.

Despite these great strengths, teaching personhood presents certain dilemmas. This article explores some of these in the context in which I have taught it, namely as an anthropologist to third year sociology and combined honours students. How, for example, could I help students, more accustomed to thinking about sociological perspectives on the relation of the self and society, to understand anthropological perspectives on personhood? How could I help them understand that the concept of the person differs from more sociologically-framed

debates over self and identity that they were more comfortable with? How could we move into a critical engagement with ontology instead of remaining within their comfort zone of identity theory?

In particular, I have been keen to explore ways of helping my students begin to think through these issues by using cultural practices and places "near to hand" as well as in more a more experiential fashion than simply via lectures, seminar discussions and readings. This is because, when teaching anthropology modules within a non-anthropology degree programme as I do, I have become increasingly concerned that whilst these students find cross-cultural material fascinating, something is lacking. They seem to have difficulty developing an empathetic and non-ethnocentric understanding of other cultural systems and values. Some of the students visibly struggle to set aside their own cultural assumptions and biases in order to in turn be able to engage seriously with other ways of formulating personhood. They get stuck on otherness, seeing only what they perceive to be the irrationality of these non-Western cultural systems. These include, for example, the notion as that kinship is not necessarily determined by shared biogenetic substance; that it can be reckoned instead in regards to place, and that place enters directly into the constitution and generation of persons (Leach 2003); or that in Melanesia, the person is understood as internally divided and partible (Strathern 1988) whilst in South India the person is understood as internally whole but with a fluid and permeable body boundary (Busby 1997); or that feeding is a vital aspect of becoming a person and participating fully in Malay social relations (Carsten 1995). In the module, personhood is presented as processual, not as based in biology or as an a-social given (Kaufman and Morgan 2005: 321). Despite many of these final year students' growing sophistication in developing a critical social science perspective on their own societal norms, the challenge of considering personhood in these other ways appears at times to be a step too far and their anthropological training too thin.

I shall explore here in closer detail one of solutions that I attempted in response to their hesitancy. In so doing, I seek to contribute to a fuller understanding of how we can teach anthropology more effectively in non-traditional settings. This is increasingly a pressing issue, given the growing numbers of anthropology doctoral graduates who are finding lectureships not in Anthropology departments but in Sociology, Religious Studies, and other interdisciplinary settings, marking "social anthropology's success as an 'exporter' discipline in UK social science" (Spencer, Jepson and Mills n.d.; see also Mills *et al* 2005). In particular, I refer here to the challenges I have experienced in teaching anthropological modules within another disciplinary context. In such contexts, students often arrive in class without having been exposed to basic anthropological principles and insights. This is not a criticism of the students, but rather the result of a difference in emphasis between two cognate but distinct scholarly traditions (sociology and anthropology in this case)[i]. It presented me with a pedagogical challenge. I determined that in order to "thicken" my student's anthropological training and to build more anthropological empathy, I needed firstly to both emulate principles of ethnographic fieldwork by, secondly, immersing the students in a setting where personhood could "come into view" in a way that was both familiar and yet uncomfortable for them. I hoped that striking this balance would help them become more adept at thinking anthropologically and more open to the internal logics of other cultural perspectives on personhood.

Teaching fieldwork skills is notoriously difficult, especially at the undergraduate level where there is often precious little scope within the curriculum to teach a technique that requires both time and immersion. These are worries specific in their own way to anthropology, but they are also ones shared by cognate disciplines such as human geography. This article thus also seeks to contribute to the existing literature addressing such concerns by contextualising it in regards to experience-base, active learning (Healy and Jenkins 2000; Kolb 1984; Ramsden 1996) but also, following della Dora (2011), to generate specific examples of fieldwork teaching practice rather than a more generalised rumination over fieldwork as an aspect of curriculum (della Dora 2011: 164, citing Coe and Smyth 2010). It is worth summarising however in brief some of the key pedagogical strengths offered by fieldwork teaching at the undergraduate level. These include the chance to link up theory with lived experience, experience which is often from the students' perspective "more memorable" and easier to retain over time (della Dora 2011: 164), thus enhancing learning. Fieldwork also promotes 'deep learning' via immersive, first-hand experiences which "can generate an affective response" to otherwise unfamiliar settings and people, building a "new attentiveness that enriches understanding" (Hope 2009: 178)[ii]. Indeed, it is this emotional response generated by fieldwork and highlighted by Hope that I sought to build into my teaching on personhood in response to the dilemma outlined above.

Whilst, then, embracing the potential of ethnographic fieldwork for teaching and learning purposes on this module, I was also hamstrung by inherent restrictions in the teaching timetable for providing a sustained period of fieldwork experience. What I ended up with was certainly a compromise, a "quasi-" ethnographic fieldwork exercise based on ethnographic and immersive principles. As I shall describe below, I turned for my (partial)

solution to an exercise based in a local cemetery. In order to more fully contextualise the exercise, I turn first to a fuller account of the module as a whole.

Framing Personhood

The module on which this article is based aims to explore the ways in which personhood is constituted through social relations and practices across the life course. This includes from before birth and during; via childrearing and caretaking practices; through naming practices and skilled practices such as hunting and animal husbandry; during the pressures on selfhood in old age or in disability; demarcations of the boundaries between life and death; at the point of death itself; and afterwards in regards to burial and remembrance. The module also seeks to develop students' knowledge of theoretical debates in the social sciences about personhood and relationality. The module pays particular attention to what these social practices reveal about the categories of nature and culture as well as to challenge Euro-western assumptions about the autonomous individual.

Key questions that motivate the module include: How do we come to understand who counts as a person? What are the key moments in life that shape personhood? What can cross-cultural differences demonstrate to us in regards to the possibilities of form that personhood can take? The module thus explores how notions of the person are reproduced and vary substantially through time and space using both cross-cultural examples and by looking at different points in the life course. However, rather than taking an approach that simply describes discrete roles and stages, the module examines the life course via a focus on how people build relations with the world and each other at various crucial points across the life course. Such connections often come into focus at moments of extreme experiences (such as birth, rites of passage, and death), but are also achieved through more mundane practices (such as eating, hunting, gardening, caretaking and remembrance).

Whether extreme or mundane, all have profound consequences for social life, and the module considers instances of both using a number of cross-cultural case studies. Such transitions can be understood as moments in which cultural meaning is made, the category of the person is reproduced, social cohesion is maintained and at times challenged. The module explores these themes using theoretical perspectives that unite the biological and the social as well as looking beyond ontologies that divide the world into human and non-human realms. By taking a life course approach to personhood, and looking at how and when "the person" is brought into being, reaffirmed, and at times threatened, we can also examine how these assumptions may vary. Is, for example, a baby a person? Answers to such a question reveal how Euro-Western interpretations of personhood reflect culturally embedded notions about moral and legal entitlements (Knight 2005).

My approach to teaching personhood draws in large part on two subfields of anthropology: medical anthropology (with a specific focus on both the new kinship studies and also on critical ageing studies) and debates over ontology. Medical anthropology has helped me sharpen my thinking about what comes to be normalised in regards to the body (both experiences of the body and those forged through our embodied forms) and the person, as well as how power and knowledge circulate and are reproduced via notions of body, health and illness. In regards to ontology, I have been deeply influenced by the anthropological literature on sub-arctic and arctic indigenous peoples, initially via the ethnographic accounts of authors such as Hallowell (1955), Tanner (1979), Scott (1989), Ridington (1990; 1988) and Brightman (1993), and more recently by Viveros de Castro (1998) and Ingold (2000; 2011). Both broad literatures hinge very much on issues of categories – and how we come to know what counts and can be included in which category, such as the category of "person" itself, but also when these categories come under threat, such as the social stigmas surrounding old age and disability, both of which can throw into jeopardy people's claim to personhood.

It is Ingold's widely cited dwelling perspective that I use to "hook" my students into thinking about personhood and ontology in the first two lectures. The dwelling perspective places human beings not at the pinnacle of the natural world, and some how removed from it, but rather understands human life as immersed in relational contexts of engagement with the world and with the environment (2000). In developing such a perspective, Ingold discusses how animism is an ontological form that presupposes humans not as living on the surface of the world, but rather as enmeshed in the 'world alive' (2011). By turning to animistic ontologies of hunting people, Ingold shows clearly how personhood relies on relations with other people as well as relying on relations with the land and with the animated cosmos. More substantially, Ingold says that while "animism is often described as a system of beliefs that imputes life or spirit into things that are truly inert" (2011: 67), such a definition is highly restrictive. This is because animism is "not a way of believing *about* the world", but more profoundly that animism is "a condition of being *in*" the world (2011: 67, emphasis in original). In this

configuration, the world, the environment is not fixed but "is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next" (2011: 68). Ingold continues, pointing out how spirits, substances, objects, people, animals and materials all exist within a "dynamic, transformative" "field of relations within which beings of all kinds…continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence" (2011: 68). Animistic perspectives on the world thus are "not the result of an infusion of spirits into the substances of the world but rather is ontologically prior to their differentiation" (2011: 68). As such, animistic perspectives offer a chance to begin thinking through with the students notions of personhood that are profoundly different to their own.

This material also allows me to open up the question of ontology as related to personhood. Holbraad (in Alberti *et al* 2011) highlights nicely the ontological dilemmas that such understandings of personhood can provoke. What is the anthropologist to do he asks, for example, "when the people you study say that a stone is a person, or have performed sacrifices to maintain the supremacy of their kind, or engage in any other activity or discourse that during an unguarded moment you would be tempted to call 'irrational'?" (2011: 902). The same question, in the context of this module, easily extends further to "how in turn is the anthropologist to make sense of this for her students?" Holbraad considers that if we approach this issue through an ontological lens, the "answer is that if things 'appear irrational,' it is because we have misunderstood them. If people say a stone is a person, it is because they are talking about something different from what we talk about when we say that it is not…Stones can both be and not be persons if what counts as a stone in either case is different" (2011: 902). This does not, Holbraad continues, mean that this is all a simple case of cultural relativism. Rather, it prompts us as anthropologists "to reconceptualise a whole host of notions that are involved in such a statement ["stones are people"]…(and to)…literally rethink what a stone and what a person might be for the equation of one with the other to even make sense…such anthropological challenges speak to very basic conceptual issues" (2011: 902-3). It is precisely these issues that teaching personhood anthropologically also provokes, and which the module seeks to unpack and critically assess.

Bringing Personhood to Life

What though of the students taking this module, all in their early twenties, and many of whom have never either experienced life crisis transitions or profound ontological difference first hand? Whilst I had determined that I would attempt to heighten my students' cross-cultural sensitivity and empathy by engaging them simultaneously in the near at hand as well as via adapting immersive ethnographic methods, I needed to find a locale where this could occur. In this, I had two further goals. My first goal was to put the resources of the city to work in order to immerse students in a set of cultural practices that reflects broader issues around personhood in their "own" (not all of the students were British) cultural setting. My second goal was to try out the ends of life (death, dying, bereavement and memorialisation) as a candidate for the exercise. Using the ends of life topic struck me as most useful for various reasons, some of which were purely pragmatic. Firstly, the topic appears later on in the module structure (lecture eight of twelve), which gave me time to build up a more complex theoretical grounding of personhood and ontology in the lectures and the seminars. It also, secondly, gave me a chance to develop a richer account of ethnographic principles and the nuts and bolts of how anthropologists have carried out research on personhood across a variety of settings. Developing both beforehand meant that the students had key points of reference both theoretically and methodologically. I hoped this would help make them feel more confident about taking on the exercise I was developing for them. Thirdly, as the "how" of anthropological inquiry was key to the exercise, I sought to engage them through a quasi-ethnographic exercise that immersed them in a different realm that they were not normally accustomed to or familiar with.

My fourth reason was highly serendipitous. I was on a winter's run one day during the Christmas holidays whilst in the early stages of thinking through the initial ideas for this module. In the midst of that run, I came across an impromptu memorial to a young man who had recently lost his life. It was on an open bit of land that has public footpaths running across it, next to a large apartment building where he had lived. A spontaneous shrine was developing at the site where his body had been discovered a few days before. A number of material objects had begun to appear: pictures of the man who had died, items serving as reminders about his life passions, flowers, stuffed animals, and cards from family members and friends were all being left. Every couple of weeks over the following several months, I would pass the memorial and notice how it had grown, decayed and been intermittently renewed, to the extent that the council (or the land owner) had erected a waist high fence demarcating the site, much like a burial plot would be marked out. In its quiet yet palatable commentary on the efforts expended by the living to maintain a sense of personhood in the face of death, it made me think seriously for the first time about the possibility of using sites of commemoration for the deceased as a way of teaching one aspect of personhood.

Whilst it had been this secular shrine that had initially inspired me, realistically I knew that I required a more permanent (and accessible) site if I was to base a significant portion of a module around it. This is how I came instead to settle on the idea of a quasi-ethnographic fieldwork trip to a local cemetery as a way into the dilemmas I outline above. All Saint's Cemetery in Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne became my experiential setting where some aspects of personhood in relation to memorialisation and death could come into view. Cemeteries are one of the few public spaces in British culture where life course transformations unfold. As such, they are accessible in an immediate, first-hand way that say, conception or birth (to take two examples also covered in the module) are not. However, cemeteries are liminal spaces, both present in everyday life as part of the neighbourhood landscape, but at the same time also "distinguish[ed]...as a privileged place, separate in time, space and emotion from the everyday routine of [their] surroundings" (Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou 2005: 34). As a site then for my students that is both familiar and yet unsettling and unknown, cemeteries offered many of the characteristics that I was hoping to incorporate into the exercise.

Preparing the Ground

In order to properly contextualise personhood and memorialisation for the students, I gave a two-hour lecture the week before the exercise was to occur on anthropological approaches to death, dying and commemoration. In addition, we discussed a brief history of the development of cemeteries in Britain, I provided recommended readings, and I asked them to watch a short, on-line, ethnographic film of the visitors to and workers at Kensal Green Cemetery, West London (Gruber 2003). The lecture was structured around how death is an event that can provoke profound social rupture that requires attention. From Hertz (1960 [1907]) onwards, anthropological studies of death, dying and bereavement have revealed a great deal about the concept of the person in a particular society as death provokes moral and social obligations and is not just a biological event (Robben 2004: 9). Students were also reminded of the relevance of van Gennep's work on rites of passage (1909) and Turner (1967) on liminality in regards to death and commemoration, topics that about two thirds of them had been introduced to in a first year anthropology module taken by many of the sociology undergraduates in the subject area.

Also highlighted in the lecture were the ways in which the dead are disposed of. We discussed the sociality of these practices, how the practices of memorialisation around death shape the social identity of those still alive as well as provide understandings of life and relations among the living (Kaufman and Morgan 2005: 323). Personhood thus is not necessarily extinguished by death, nor is the deceased necessarily no longer part of society (Robben 2004: 9, 11). Instead, as Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou state, commemorative mourning practices "enact the bonds that continue to attach [mourners] to the deceased" (2005: 26). This is a point comprehensively demonstrated by their cross-cultural ethnographic study of memory making, ethnicity, and the incorporation of the dead into everyday life in six London cemeteries, *The Secret Cemetery* (2005). These authors further explore the ways in which "concepts of the person are linked to the corporeal self and to its material extension through the tomb, made of memorial stone and sometimes garden" (2005: 25). As I will discuss, it is these practices of memorialisation as linked to personhood that I sought to highlight in the fieldwork exercise. Furthermore, the processes whereby this is true not just of the dead, but also of the living were highlighted as "the tradition of erecting tombs over the dead [are] intended to honour the dead, [but] they often also glorify the living. A family's wealth, social status and taste may all be on display" (Firth 2005: xix). Students were encouraged to take the principles of this grounding lecture and apply them to their own experiences of the cemetery that we were to visit, All Saint's.

The origin of this cemetery is neatly tied into the broader historical shifts of the burial and commemoration of the dead in British cemeteries, and I rely here on Franics, Kellaher and Neophytou (2009: 30-32) for an account of this. They recount how between the 8th and 19th centuries, the burial of most people in England was in churchyards sanctified by the Church, with Jewish people, dissenters and other non-Anglicans interred in separate grounds independent from the Church. However by the 19th century, high rates of migration into industrialising cities were creating an enormous demand on churchyard burial capacity. There was a growing concern that these overcrowded graveyards posed a threat to public health, such as cholera and typhus. Urban sanitation reformers began urging a change to the status quo. By the 1850s, stakeholder companies began emerging, offering a new alternative by building cemeteries on the edges of cities and towns. These spacious sites offered graves that were not crammed closely together but rather were in attractive ornamental grounds where each individual would receive a separate, identifiable grave. All Saint's Cemetery, opened in 1856 in what was then a rural part of a booming and industrialising Newcastle upon Tyne, is thus highly representative of this era.

Since its establishment, the city has grown up around it. The cemetery, marked off from the residential neighbourhood around it by a grand stone arched entry way and wrought iron fencing, is now surrounded by rows of Victorian terraces built mainly in the 1890s. These properties, once the homes to a prosperous middle class, are now also densely populated by students renting accommodation. In total around 90,000 burials have taken place at All Saint's, and continue to the present day.

In addition to the lecture material presented that situated the topic, the students and I also spent time discussing some ground rules for the exercise in advance. A key consideration was comportment: cemeteries are public places and we were entitled to be there, but a number of tacit cultural rules also govern cemetery space. It was worth making these explicit in advance of the trip in order that they were not inadvertently forgotten. So, for example, burial sites require respect (must not be walked on; must not be posed with for the camera) as does the tranquillity of the space, which needs to be maintained. Additionally, for ethical reasons, I asked that the students not approach other visitors at the cemetery if they came across them. If, however, students were engaged with by members of the public, I suggested that they explain that they were students at Newcastle University taking part in a field exercise. Finally, I encouraged students to use these tacit cultural rules as material for critical reflection and to consider what the rules themselves reveal about notions of the dead, personhood, and relations with the living.

On the designated day, the students and I met on campus and then took the short walk to the cemetery together. The students worked in groups of three to four in the cemetery. I asked them to document the experience both with written notes and visually with their camera phones (but with explicit instructions not to take pictures of any people visiting the cemetery or working there in order to protect privacy). Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou write that "the appearance and structure of the funerary landscape provides visual and experiential cues for those who visit and use the cemetery. These clues both shape mourners' actions and emotions and constrain them, as well as convey the meanings of customs and practices in a particular cemetery setting" (2005: 29). It is precisely the documentation and analysing of this funerary landscape in regards to what it can reveal about personhood that was the object of the fieldwork trip. The exercise lasted for two hours and all students willingly took part. The following week's seminar was then dedicated to presentations by each group of their findings and critical reflection on the experience. The students loaded the images they had taken during the exercise onto PowerPoint to share with the rest of the seminar, and spoke to the photos during seminar in turn. Questions they were asked to help frame the visit included: What is here? What else is here? What isn't here? What is the physical layout like? What is the feeling of the place like? What materials are used in the cemetery site as a whole? Who is here? Who isn't here? What is happening here? What symbols are in used in the cemetery space? How are individuals represented? How is personhood represented? The exercise was not assessed, but it was mandatory and all students participated.

Reporting Back

Faced with limited time resources and limited opportunities to immerse my students in cultural settings that would provide first hand learning on the topic of personhood, this cemetery-based fieldwork exercise is a not wholly satisfying compromise. Ideally, and especially for this cohort of students not reading for an anthropology degree but taking a third year anthropology module, I would have liked to have created an exercise that was more explicitly ethnographic. By this, I mean an exercise that more explicitly thrust the students into the unknown and unfamiliar; one that unfolded over a longer period of time and over perhaps multiple places; as well as one that involved not only participant observation in a locale, but also required that the students engage meaningfully with people engaged in the practices that we wished to better understand.

Despite these reservations, the cemetery exercise did achieve modest success towards the goals that underpinned it. Discussions the students and I had at the follow-up seminar meetings when they presented their findings confirmed this. Firstly, the majority of the students reported on the unique affective dimension created by being in the cemetery. For instance, whilst it is located on a main city artery with heavy traffic noise that impeded conversation as we walked together to the cemetery, as soon as we turned off the road and through the cemetery gates, the noise dissipated rapidly. This effect was enhanced as they wandered through the landscape and lost themselves in the meandering paths. Whilst in the midst of the bustling city, the cemetery was calm and silent, apart from the occasional singing bird. Secondly, the unusualness of the space in this regard was also heightened by its close proximity to their everyday lives and yet its simultaneous utter unfamiliarity. The cemetery was not a setting that the students knew or were previously familiar with, despite the fact that many of them walked past it twice each day whilst travelling between home and university. Putting unknown urban spaces to use as a teaching

resource by employing the near at hand was thus a goal that was met, and one that, to a certain extent, also confronted them with the unfamiliar and unknown.
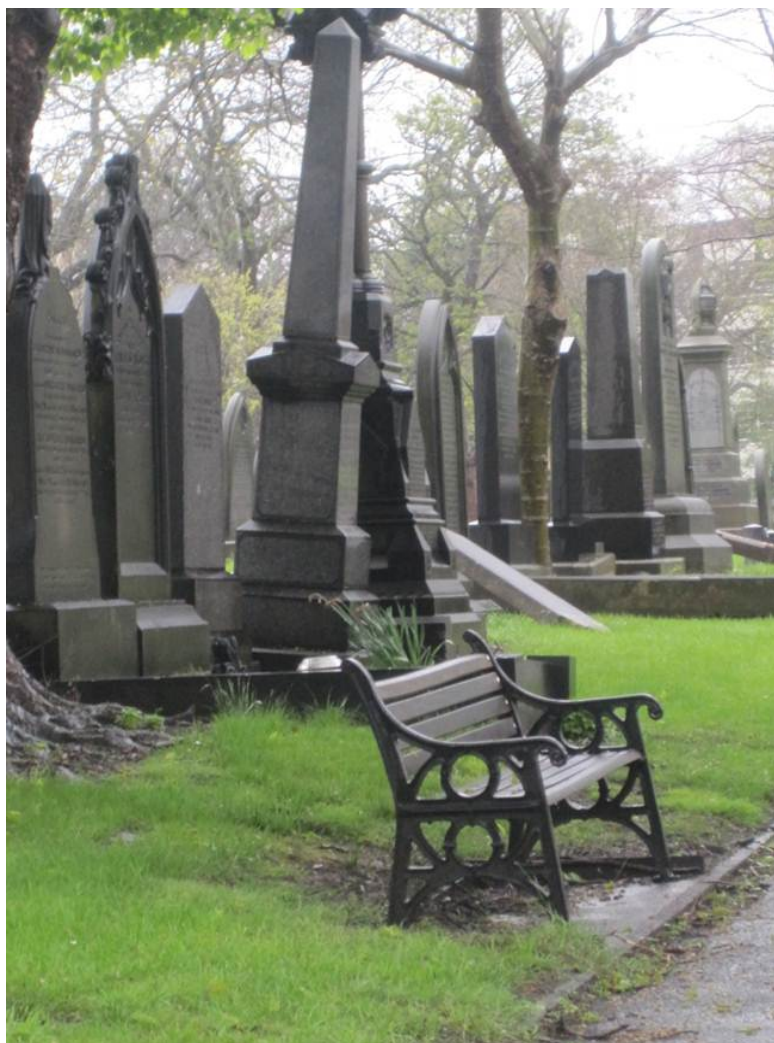

Figure 1 Bench, gravestones, and trees on one of the main boulevards of the cemetery.

The affective dimension of All Saint's was also enhanced for the students by their discovery of unexpected aspects of the cemetery, such as how the cemetery layout mirrors that of a park or botanical garden (Figure 1). The layout of this cemetery, like many of its era, is based on tree-lined boulevards. The paths are dotted with park benches as resting places for visitors. The presence of a green oasis in the midst of a densely inhabited city also provides welcome sanctuary for various forms of wildlife, which many of the students commented about. A further affective aspect they remarked upon was the absence of any other visitors, despite the many traces they had left on previous visits. These traces in the face of absence heightened the atmospheric sense of place whereby again, in the midst of a busy city, there was a substantial tract of land that was set apart from the urban rhythms the students were more accustomed to. The students were also struck by the wide spectrum of care and neglect that various burial sites were witness to – some plots were regularly cared for and tended whilst others had fallen into complete disrepair (Figure 2 and 3) – as well as the various historical eras marked by style of memorial and the dates on the gravestones. Such impressions that "being there" made were marked on the students and evidenced in their group presentations, bringing "deep learning" about the diversity of the forms of commemoration in the cemetery into view in a way that was not otherwise possible, as confirmed by the literature on fieldwork teaching (della Dora 2011; Healy and Jenkins 2000; Hope 2009; Kolb 1984; Ramsden 1996).

Figure 2 A landscaped plot showing signs of careful tending.

Simultaneously, some (but not all) of the students also reported a profound sense of unease and discomfort at being in the cemetery. This was a sense that I sought to explore with them during seminar as it touches again on the issue of immersion into the unknown and unfamiliar. The students who experienced this explained it when probed by saying that they felt like "intruders" and that they did not feel "entitled" to be in the cemetery. Who cemeteries are for and what they are for, issues around alterity and anthropological practice, the boundaries between public and private displays of grief, and how these displays connect back to personhood became further and useful points of discussion around these reflections. So too did debating the ethics of participant observation more generally and to what extent researchers could and do "give back" to the communities they work with. This reported sense of trespass gave me the chance to explore with them how longer term ethnographic fieldwork, carried out in similar settings by Gruber (2003) and Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou (2005), clearly could establish respectful relations that were not invasive of people in potentially vulnerable moments of their lives. These various issues helped the students think through nuances of long-term ethnographic fieldwork more closely (based on their own initial feelings of discomfort), and were valuable ways of furthering their perception of and analytical thinking about the first-hand experiences of data collection, but also on the substantive topic at stake itself.

Figure 3 A damaged and untended plot.

It also helped me think through the ethical differences demanded by teaching and learning contexts compared to those in research-based contexts. By this I mean that whilst ethical issues raised in both domains overlap in many respects, I had not previously appreciated just how much weight I attributed to making a long-term commitment to conducting research in terms of compensating somehow for invading those social worlds and practices. "Proper research ethnography," it seems, feels more justifiable than asking to enter a social field for a short-term engagement solely for the purposes of teaching and learning. Perhaps in hindsight this also explains the compromise I settled on of developing an exercise which for an anthropologist was strangely unpeopled - no one to talk to – and one based instead on tracing cultural practices and meanings by the symbols, use of place, and traces left by people (both the deceased and their mourners) rather than by combining this with what people have to *say* about such practices and meanings. That it should take planning and carrying out a teaching and learning exercise of this sort to reveal some of my own hitherto unexamined assumptions about the justification and validity of ethnographic practice (as initial and as unformed as these reflections may still be) is in and of itself an interesting point for reflection on how both aspects of lecturing in a research-led institution (teaching, learning and research) can mutually inform, shape and enhance one another.

The exercise also helped the students learn valuable lessons about personhood from a different perspective than they had began the module with. They learned about how in some cases the category of the person transcends death via the elaborate work that many families will dedicate to sustaining meaningful representations of the deceased. Certain plots attracted the attention of multiple student groups in this respect, such as the plot shown in Figure 4, which is laden with symbolic figurines, tools and text to represent and remember the deceased.

Figure 4 A heavily decorated plot; notice the four figures, two of whom are seated on a miniature park bench and facing away from the camera.

A number of the student groups also recognised and highlighted the significance of single massive gravestones on family plots in their presentations. These gravestones are incrementally inscribed sometimes over the span of a century with the names of family members 'reunited' in death (see for example Figure 5), choices that some families made rather than having individual stones for each family member. Some students noted as well that the centrality of personhood comes into view via the culturally highly valorised commemoration of the dead in that such large tranches of valuable city centre land are reserved solely for the memorialisation of the dead.

Figure 5 A family plot gravestone with the names of multiple generations inscribed.

Finally, one gravestone in particular and student reflections on it stood out as giving the strongest indication that disrupting normalcy and achieving some sort of empathy with the "other" (c.f. Hope 2009) was possible via this exercise, despite all the limitations noted above. In a moment of raw and profound recognition of self in the other, one group used an image of the gravestone in Figure 6 during their presentation. They noted that this was the grave of infant twin boys who had died the day after their birth in 1988. When first looking at the picture, I was not at all sure why the group had singled out that particular grave. Whilst I appreciated the sadness that such an untimely death could provoke, there were a number of other stones in the cemetery in memory of the very young. Why had they chosen this particular one? As I listened to the group explain its significance to them, I realised that 1988 was the year before many of the students in the room had been born. The deceased twins were thus in close age proximity to this cohort; the students speaking to the slide pointed out that the twins would have perhaps just graduated from university the previous summer as they themselves were about to do the same in a few months' time. Other students in the seminar joined in, as this group had not been the only one to notice the coincidence. This represented a significant moment of realisation of their own mortality, but also exceeded it. As the students continued their discussion, describing the location, condition and brief inscription on the stone, they also imagined the never-to-be-realised future of those twins in terms of their own subjectivity. In so doing, they demonstrated that how personhood is understood, represented and valorised in death had come suddenly very close indeed to their own lifeworlds in a way that perhaps only lecture-based work could never have achieved.

Conclusions

In sum, teaching undergraduate level anthropology to non-anthropology degree students presents a series of unique dynamics. Despite this, I by no means wish to overstate the differences between (in this case) an anthropology degree and a sociology degree. Nor do I seek to portray sociology as a non-empathetic discipline and anthropology as the cure, for this is far from the case. However, I do believe that the grounding principles of each discipline necessarily shape the skills and abilities that students bring to the study of other lifeworlds. In a module that is based so centrally on ontological difference and cross-cultural distinctions in regards to personhood, empathy in the face of profound alterity is a key skill for learning and for teaching anthropology. This is however not a skill that is as readily available in these students' tool-kit as it might otherwise be, had they been studying on a single honours anthropology degree programme. To address this issue, I have begun exploring here ways in which to 'thicken' a sense of empathy via a fieldwork-based exercise in a local cemetery. Whilst the exercise could not be fully ethnographic for the reasons outlined above, drawing on ethnographic principles and exploring them critically with the students on the module in the cemetery setting did move the students closer to this empathy. It also helped foster a willingness to embrace the unfamiliar in an attempt to better understand other perspectives on the world. It is for these reasons that I shall continue to include and develop this exercise in my teaching. It is also why I believe that there is a broader case to be made for why this kind of activity should be part of introducing students to thinking and seeing anthropologically on a more general level.

Figure 6 Age mates.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

i See also Phillimore (2001) for a more in-depth consideration of what can be like to work as an anthropologist in a sociology department in the UK.

ii Note however that Hope is also careful to point out that this is not a simple recipe for success as people vary widely "in their ability to be attentive and open to others" (2009: 179).