JASO Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford

UNLEARNING TRAUMA: ANTHROPOLOGY, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND THE CHILD WITHIN

JULIET BROWN[1]

Judith Okely's work brought anthropology and psychoanalysis into dialogue, profoundly shaping my own research. I first encountered her writing during my practice-led PhD in Anthropology and Multimedia at UCL, where I was struck by her willingness to turn the anthropological gaze inward, towards the anthropology of home and the centres of power in the UK.

Her reflections on her boarding school experience, and on the power dynamics inscribed on the child's body, resonated deeply with my own work with boarding school survivors. Although foundational, this aspect of her scholarship has often been overlooked. It was only with the publication of *Boarding School Syndrome* by the late Joy Schaverien that Judith's contribution to this field began to receive wider recognition.

Despite the often-painful subject matter, Judith wrote with a distinctive wit and irony that made even her most disturbing recollections compelling. Reflecting on her own childhood, she described 'the process whereby creativity and originality, ideally crucial to knowledge, are formed through unlearning what was presumed learned,' (Okely 2012: 36-37) Long before the language of decolonising the curriculum became widespread, Judith was already articulating the necessity of dismantling inherited systems of knowledge and authority.

Her accounts of boarding school life reveal the contradictions of that pedagogic regime. She recalls being punished for crying after the death of her father, receiving disobedience marks for her grief, while being required to publicly mourn the death of the King – a 'remote figurehead.' As she observed, this system demanded the suppression of personal emotion while enforcing absolute deference to imperial authority. Judith described her anthropological practice as emerging through 'an opposing response to trauma.' (Okely 2012: 38). Her intellectual trajectory was shaped, in part, by what she termed 'psychoanalytical motivations.' Through her work with Traveller communities, she encountered alternative ways of integrating grief, including children's full participation in mourning rituals. This offered, in her words, a 'strange resolution,' allowing previously buried memories of her father's death to surface and be reworked.

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[1] Admissions Tutor, Documentary Direction MA, National Film & Television School, UK. Juliet Brown holds a PhD in Anthropology and Multimedia from UCL. Her doctoral research, *Immersive Encounters with Boarding School Syndrome*, examined how multimodal visual representations of the child-self can facilitate introspection in psychotherapy. She is an incoming trainee at the Terapia Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling, where she is beginning to orient her practice toward child and adolescent psychotherapy. Email:

The synergy between her psychoanalytic practice and anthropological work provided a foundation for my research at the intersection of multimodal anthropology and psychotherapy. To my knowledge, she is the only anthropologist to apply participant observation to the internal relationship between an adult self and an imagined child self. She reframes this dynamic in terms of the child self as participant and the adult self as observer, arguing that: 'Participant observation (crucial to social anthropologists) is perfectly split. In the study of childhood, a temporal split between participation and observation is special, and in some instances unavoidable, because children cannot articulate their experiences in the language of adults. Only after childhood can it be thus expressed' (Okely 1996: 149).

This insight became a key point of departure for my fieldwork in adult group psychotherapy, where participants engaged with remembered child selves to revisit and reframe early experience. In multimodal settings, we drew on her model of the adult engaging with the memory of the child self to reconsider and potentially transform early internalised power relations between institution and child. In this context, Judith's work provides both a conceptual and methodological foundation for exploring how institutional power becomes internalised and how it may be reworked over time.

Judith's work continues to offer a vital framework for thinking between disciplines, between past and present, and between the observing adult and the remembered child. Her insight that participant observation might also unfold within the self opened a profound way of understanding how early experience endures, often unspoken, in the body and the unconscious. For those of us working at the intersection of anthropology and psychotherapy, her writing provides both permission and method: to attend carefully to lived experience, to interrogate the conditions that shaped it, and to recognise that processes of unlearning are central to both knowledge and repair. It is in this place where memory is revisited, and silenced experience finds expression, that Judith's legacy continues to resonate.

Bibliography

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