

also prepared to use the questions to think about what you see. Next we answer the question How do anthropologists learn about culture?

Chapter 1



EXERCISES

Exercise 1: The Embarrassing Incident

If culture includes shared understandings for how to behave, then anthropologists can learn a good deal from observing what embarrasses the culture's participants, and from inferring which understandings about how to behave were broken. In this exercise you will collect a pair of biographical anecdotes from your classmates and analyze them for the cultural rules lying behind them.

Break into groups of three, and collect a story from two of you. Each informant gives a short description of an embarrassing incident in which the informant was present, although not necessarily as the "perpetrator." All of you take notes on the form on page 49, which is a semistructured interview protocol—a fancy name for a common anthropological research tool. Such an interview protocol guides the questioning and organizes the answers but doesn't constrain their wording.

The informant provides the answers to the first four questions, but your group should develop an answer to the fifth question: What was the cultural rule that appears to have been broken? The cultural rule may be expressed as a dictum, such as You may begin eating only after Mother has raised her fork.

Compare the two incidents you've collected. What do they have in common? For example, is the same rule broken in both? Did the audience respond to the transgression with similar remarks or actions?

Take a poll of what rules were broken in all the incidents in the class. Does the gender, age, or ethnic affiliation of the participants influence what causes embarrassment?

Exercise 2: The American Family

This class shares some culture. Need proof? Remove a blank page from your notebook and orient it in landscape mode (long side is horizontal). Across the top write "The American Family." Now draw a picture on that page illustrating that title.

You hesitate, you chuckle, and you say, "I can't draw." That's not the point I intend to make, but notice how widespread this reaction is. Most adults say, "I can't draw," although most drew enthusiastically when they were children. I've asked you to do something that is not a comfortable habit for adults and definitely odd for an anthropology class, so everyone is nervous.

Semistructured Interview Protocol: Embarrassing Incidents

Incident 1

Incident 2

1. Describe the scene: who, where, when, what was happening:

2. Identify the embarrassing event:

3. Describe the responses of the "audience":

4. Describe the responses of the "perpetrator":

5. Explain the cultural rule that was broken:

Just draw, for at least five minutes. When everyone is finished, the pictures can be taped on the wall (in small classes) or circulated within groups (in large classes).

This exercise is not a test of your artistic ability, an exercise in embarrassment, or a technique for diagnosing your neuroses. This is "auto-ethnography"—you are interviewing yourselves as informants of American culture, using a technique called "personal documentation."

To analyze these drawings for what they reveal about U.S. culture, identify the patterns of shared understandings among their images. On one level, of course,

each drawing is unique, like your fingerprint or your personality. Compared to people in other nations, many Americans like to be “different,” to express their individuality. But at the same time, there are a surprising number of common elements in these drawings, aren’t there?

1. What are the shared elements?
2. How widely are they shared? This is a measure of shared understandings, or how much culture the class shares.
3. Sort the drawings into a few piles that differ on some basic pattern. How many patterns are represented?
4. How would you label each of those patterns?
5. Do the patterns reflect any of the cultural and ethnic diversity of the students in the class?
6. What proportion of all the drawings does each pattern represent?
7. As for the most common pattern: how did we come to share those particular elements? Beyond replying, “It’s in our culture,” you need to suggest how this pattern got into our culture during our society’s history. For guidance, consult *The Family in America: Searching for Social Harmony in the Industrial Age* (Carlson 2003).
8. How did you learn this pattern that you drew?
9. You are surely aware of all the patterns represented here, so what did you “mean to say” when you chose the pattern you drew?

Exercise 3: Being Multicultural

As I quoted earlier in this chapter, “Most students, like other contemporary humans, are multicultural. They operate with a diverse and often contradictory set of cultural traditions” (Caughey 2002, 174). You have a diverse set of traditions because of the variety of ethnic, religious, social class, or other communities that you have belonged to. Those traditions may not fit well with each other, so you have to manage or “juggle” them. Furthermore, you have a relationship with each of these acquired traditions. You may be an advocate of the tradition, as I am of my longtime membership in the Adirondack Mountain Club. You may be a resister, as a lapsed Catholic might be. You may be in a negotiated/critical relationship with the culture, accepting it but holding it at arm’s length, picking and choosing from its repertoire of practices and ideas, as some people do with their family traditions.

One’s identity is made up substantially of the way one combines these various cultures and subcultures to answer the question, Who am I? Today students tackle this question when they create personal web pages. In this exercise you will analyze the mix of cultures by which a person represents himself or herself on a personal web page.

Background

If you haven't looked at students' personal web pages, begin this exercise by browsing among a few at your institution. If you haven't created your own web page, sketch out what you would want yours to look like and to say.

Analysis

Analyze the "who am I?" aspects of two other students' personal web pages as well as your own.

The page's author uses verbal and graphic means to announce (or hint at) characteristics such as the following, all of which suggest how the author is linked to communities with cultures. Those communities may be face-to-face (such as one's residence group), multisited (one's far-flung family), imagined (one's co-religionists in America), or virtual (one's discussion group on the Internet).

1. age
2. gender
3. sexual preference
4. hometown
5. current living conditions
6. work
7. racial or ethnic affiliations
8. language
9. political and other opinions
10. recreational pursuits
11. participation in organizations, clubs
12. likes and dislikes
13. religious or spiritual background and interests
14. academic focus
15. future plans
16. marital/romantic status
17. other persons or animals central in their lives
18. possessions central in their lives
19. lifestyle (vegetarian, night-owl, etc.)
20. links to other websites

Notice how the personal web pages describe their authors by linking them to a specific, perhaps a unique, mix of communities, each with its own set of shared practices and ideas, lifestyles and symbols, ethnic flags, value orientations, rituals, and jargon.

Such self-presentations may be incorrect or incomplete, but they are fairly accurate because feedback from our peer groups who see these pages holds us to a certain standard of honesty and contributes to our self-knowledge. (“You . . . a *granola*? No you’re not.”) The self-presentations in web pages often emphasize the author’s distinctiveness, even uniqueness, but that emphasis on distinctiveness paradoxically reveals our shared American cultural values of individualism, self-expression, and self-realization: we’re all alike in our efforts to be unlike.

Answer these analytical and comparative questions about the multicultural character of three personal web pages, including your own page (or proposed page).

- What connections to lifestyles, cultures, or subcultures can be inferred from the students’ self-descriptions?
- How do the other two students’ mixes of cultures compare to those that can be inferred from your web page (or proposed page)?
- Do you think the degree of multiculturalism evidenced in the three web pages is a recent phenomenon—that is, that young men and women in America in 1906 would not have been as multicultural?
- In the personal pages, are there clues to any perceived or potential contradiction among the various communities the student participates in? Perhaps her religion and her science major are potentially in disagreement about Creation and evolution. Are there clues to how the student manages this contradiction?
- In your web page (or proposed page), what is your relationship (advocate, resister, or negotiated/critical) to each of the cultures that can be inferred from your self-description?

The product of this exercise is your personal web page or proposed web page, a page from each of the other two web pages, and answers to these questions.

Exercise 4: Race Classification

This exercise investigates notions of race in American culture, relying on readers of this book and the U.S. government as informants.

1. On a card or a slip of paper labeled “Humankind,” list the races of the world today. Put an asterisk (*) beside the term or terms that best describes your race. (You may describe yourself as multiracial or declare that none of these terms applies.) The lists will be collected, counted, and discussed in class.
2. On another card or slip of paper labeled “U. S.,” list the races in the United States today. For each of those groups, estimate its percentage of the U. S. population (currently about 300 million total). These slips will be collected, analyzed, and discussed in class.
3. Your instructor will provide you with the questions about race and ethnic identification asked on the current U. S. Census standard form. Answer

these questions on a slip of paper or card labeled “Census.” These will also be collected, analyzed, and discussed in class.