



EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Positions on a Landscape

Conduct this exercise if you are reading ethnographies in your coursework. In this exercise you will evaluate how the ethnography you have read or nearly finished might differ if you took the author's place. Because most ethnographic authors in the last twenty years have been attentive to the reflexive question, you will usually find numerous clues about the author for comparison to yourself. The author is revealed through writing style, work methods, autobiographical asides, and choice of study topics. There is a difference in your training, of course, but there is more than that. You may differ in gender, class, ethnic group, and political or moral views, to name a few ways. You'll stand in different positions on the landscape, so to speak, and your perspectives will be different. Look also at the similarities and differences between your culture(s) and the culture described in the ethnography, because those too will have consequences for your perspective.

1. What aspect of your hosts' life will interest you?
2. Which of your personal and cultural characteristics will help you to live in this society and study the culture?
3. Which of your personal and cultural characteristics will hinder you?
4. To what aspects of the hosts' lives are you probably going to be denied access, and which are you probably going to disregard, avoid, or misunderstand?
5. How would the culture appear differently to your mother? To your roommate, spouse, or best friend?
6. What (if anything) can you do to assure that what you bring back to us from your hosts is valid—that is, an accurate reflection of what was happening?

Compare answers with those of your classmates and instructor.

Exercise 2: Team Ethnography

Attend a public group event at which you are welcome. The event can be very unstructured, but the participants should be interacting. Examples are a student party, a church or temple service, a play rehearsal, sports event, or morning coffee among locals at the donut shop. Enlist two colleagues to attend the event with you.

Split up and observe the event separately. Afterward, each of the three participants writes a 300–600 word description of the event. Compare the three descriptions. They can be expected to vary somewhat in focus of attention, interpretation of events, and reactions to events because you were in different places, watching different actions, and interacting with different people.

1. What do all three reports mention?

2. Do they describe it in similar ways?
3. Why is there agreement about those aspects?
4. How do your reports differ?
5. Are the differences in your reports due to differences in the observers or in the observers' experiences at the event?
6. How would you revise your report after reading the other two?
7. Is your revision more valid? Why or why not?

Submit your event report and your response to these questions.

Exercise 3: The Ethnography as Mirror

An important goal of the reflexive question is the greater awareness of one's own culture and perspective, which comes from reviewing it at the same time one explores another's culture. What does studying the Yanomamo, Inuit, Basque, or Finn make you think about your own culture? If you have recently read an ethnography as part of this course, ask these questions of it:

1. How has your civilization impacted the culture in question? Trade, missionaries, conquest, and television are examples.
2. By living with and studying them, how has the anthropologist impacted the hosts' culture? What impact might your presence have?
3. How has studying these people's lives changed the author?
4. How might living with these people affect you?
5. How has contact with or study of the culture in question affected your society's culture? For example, U.S. and European demand for information about Native Americans is high. Native American art and ritual elements, artifacts, and words have entered European American culture. Americans' current interest in kokopeli figures, dream catchers, and sweat lodges is just the latest in a 500-year history of influence.
6. Although your reflexive experience of reading an ethnography will be less intense than the author's experience of fieldwork, a book can "make you think." How has your new knowledge of how these people live influenced your ideas about your own culture—about family, duty, power, wealth, honor, privacy, democracy, matrimony, or other important topics?

Exercise 4: The Satirical Epiphany

A minor genre of anthropological writing is what I call the satirical epiphany, which is reflexive anthropology at its best. The author satirizes both the culture being described and the anthropological perspective of the observer. If the author is successful, the reader, while laughing, experiences the "aha!" reaction, a flash of understanding, an epiphany about the described culture or about culture in general. Satirical epiphanies both inform and humble, and are often entertaining as

well. They play with the idea that there are many different places on the “landscape” where one can stand to observe the culture.

Here is an excerpt from what is probably the most popular satirical epiphany. The ethnographer is reporting on the attention given to the body among the Nacirema.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole [health ritual] system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man’s only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influence of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses . . . The daily ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures. (Miner 1956)

The author makes the familiar exotic. (Do you get it?) Adopting a “scientific” style, the author distances himself and us from the culture under investigation so we may think about it more dispassionately. The Naciremas’ attention to beautification and hygiene strikes the author as excessive and irrational, and he struggles unsuccessfully to remain “objective” about that. We are entertained both because he is right (the Nacirema *do* seem silly and bizarre) and because he’s wrong (he sounds objective but he has fallen into the anthropological bad habit of defining anything that doesn’t make sense as “magic” or “ritual”). The joke within the joke is that the author is a Nacirema himself.

Compose a satirical epiphany of about 300 words. Select a feature from your own cultural mix that you would like other participants, who will be your readers, to become more aware of. For this short exercise, choose something fairly focused. Describe this cultural feature from the perspective of a cultural anthropologist who is well trained, has done good fieldwork, and is trying to impress us with her/his professionalism and objectivity. Nevertheless, what we consider a familiar cultural feature will look less familiar from the etic perspective of this anthropological stranger. Your challenge is to write something funny because it is true, or seems so to your readers.