LARA

LEARNING AND RESIDENCE ABROAD

UNIT FOUR

Shared Cultural Knowledge

CONTENTS

SECTION ONE

1. Introduction

> We ....say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves). We cannot find our feet with them.
>
> (Wittgenstein quoted in Geertz 1973: 13)

> ... it is useless to try and explain the varieties of social life by reference to individual behaviour, even behaviour which is so common in a particular society that it appears to epitomise it. English society cannot be explained by reference to British humour, British love of dogs and eccentrics, nor the 'stiff upper lip' though humourists have sometimes half-persuaded us to the contrary.
>
> (Sutherland 1974:24)

This unit introduces some of the fundamental conceptual work that underpins anthropology and ethnographic methods. Students are encouraged to look beneath the 'invisibility' of everyday life in order to make explicit the common sense knowledge needed to account for familiar occurrences. In doing this, they can also begin to account for why some behaviour does not fit well into routine activities. For example, why does the busker on the underground provoke avoidance behaviour? (See Unit 3 on non-verbal behaviour).

The next stage is for students to begin to see patterns and regularities in the behaviour, and the knowledge required to interpret it. A particular activity or routine does not have a one-off meaning but is itself embedded in other meanings which in turn are part of larger structures of meaning extending out like the circles of a whirlpool:

> However defined, the concept of culture helps the ethnographer search for a logical, cohesive pattern in the myriad, often ritualistic behaviors and ideas that characterize a group. This concept becomes immediately meaningful after a cross-cultural experience. Everything is new to a student first entering a different culture. Attitudes or habits that natives espouse virtually without thinking are distinct and clear to the stranger. (Fetterman 1989: 27)

The last section of this unit raises some questions about the notion of 'culture' and 'sharedness'. These are introduced by raising the issue of 'evidence' and the basis on which ethnographic interpretations are made. Ethnographers may observe behaviour

and ask questions about what it means. But they cannot assume, therefore, that they have captured the meaning. That would assume that there is only one fixed or essential meaning and that the accumulation of these meanings defines a 'culture' in some unproblematic way. Anthropologists have become increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of a 'culture', with a finite set of meanings waiting to be discovered, with the associations of colonialism and stereotyping which go with it. So this unit also aims to disturb students out of any assumptions that the evidence they collect is any more than their interpretations which, in turn, have been formed by their experiences, over time, as social beings.

2. Links with other units

The search for an understanding of the insider's interpretation of events is the ethnographer's continuous task. So, all the units in this course are concerned with shared cultural knowledge. For example, the Unit 5 on Family and Unit 6 on Gender look at aspects of the social structure and the cultural practices which enact them. Units 15, 16 and 17 examine some of the rituals and conventions that hold social relations together, while Units 8-12 introduce methods of cultural interpretation.

The section on the Ethnography of Communication in the background notes below gives more detailed links. Some of the notions such as 'thick description' have already been introduced in Unit 2.

3. Background notes

The ethnographer's purpose is to write about some highly focused aspect of the social and cultural world of a particular group. The act of writing is an act of construction and interpretation. It is about the individual writer making some kind of sense out of the behaviour he or she observes and participates in. This construction of meaning out of behaviour by the ethnographer is similar to the process of meaning-making which a group enacts as it identifies its 'culture' to others. The constant interplay of meaning and behaviour permeates the anthropological literature and is also typical of lay views of 'culture': for example, 'X culture shows great respect towards their elders'. This everyday view of 'culture' is distinct from 'Culture' with a capital 'C', meaning high culture as in literature, opera and art (although of course, they are also aspects of our cultural world.)

It is a truism that a group, and in particular a dominant group, will think of others as having a 'culture' – often strange, exotic or unpleasantly peculiar and even dangerous – while the group itself sees its practices as normal and natural and sufficiently everyday not to be categorised or stigmatised as a 'culture'. The history of England v the English (language and people) and in its reaction to the rest of the United Kingdom and Eire is a good example of this naturalisation (see Evans 1993). Despite the tourist industry's

best attempts, for example, to package India, the Caribbean or Turkey as alluring and exotic, the experience of cultural difference, for most people, remains largely negative. This unit aims to help students think through what is involved in a cultural analysis and so think through their own experience of cultural differences. It also begins to problematise, in a very introductory way, the idea of 'culture' as consisting simply of shared knowledge, values and ways of behaving.

On not defining culture

There have been hundreds of definitions of 'culture' which have only served to show that such a notion cannot be fixed and given some permanent conceptual shape. A list of such definitions should make this point and some students will feel safer with one (see Handout 1) but they need to treat it with due caution. Indeed, the purpose of the whole course is to encourage students, when they go for their period abroad, to challenge any preconceptions that there is a new culture, out there, waiting, prone to be discovered. The course aims to help them come to a realisation that the community they have participated in does not have a single set of shared values and meanings and that in writing about the community, they have not established some timeless truths about them, but have made <u>one</u> interpretation which is itself constructed out of their own culturally determined views. As Clifford Geertz says "cultural analysis is guessing at meanings" (Geertz 1973 p20) and is "intrinsically incomplete – worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is." (p29).

However, students may want to know that there are competing theories at work in trying to explain the social and cultural forces in people's lives. We look here at four different ways of understanding 'culture': the materialist, the cognitive, the semiotic and the critical.

The materialist view

This view of society is one in which the material conditions of existence and the organisation of production determine the social and cultural patterns of a society. Culture is seen as what is observable: products and learned behaviour. In the language classroom, this view of culture is often realised as discrete items of behaviour to do with customs and ways of life. The difficulty with this view is that it assumes that we can understand difference by simply observing it. Another difficulty is that describing items of behaviour in a relatively diffuse way cannot then be summed up as a group's 'culture'. Nevertheless this view of culture remained dominant for a long time as many of the definitions in Handout 1 suggest.

The cognitive view

Goodenough is the best known protagonist of the cognitive or mentalist view of culture. He defined 'culture' as "a system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting" (Goodenough 1971). Culture is abstracted from actual behaviour and practice and instead consists of knowledge structures which guide behaviour and which can be

analysed as interlinking components by the ethnographer. The focus shifts from the outside, the observable, to the inside, to models for perceiving, believing and judging. Cultural knowledge is a set of cognitive maps through which the world is seen and categorised. For example, the western notion of marriage conceptualises it as a fragile object which has to be 'worked on', can 'break', 'needs to be mended' and so on. Cognitive views of 'culture' use various interviewing techniques to elicit the language of informants. This data then forms the basis for understanding how they categorise the world and develop models for it to guide their everyday experiences.

The semiotic view

This third set of theories is closely associated with Clifford Geertz and is a semiotic approach to culture as 'socially established structures of meaning'. Geertz borrows a metaphor from Max Weber to illuminate his notion of 'culture' and it is one of the best known attempts at a definition: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning". (Geertz 1973: 5). He asks the question: How do people come to make meanings out of their lives? What are the layers and structures of meaning in which people are enmeshed as each set of interpretations, in turn, is embedded in another? It is for this reason that cultural analysis becomes more incomplete the more inside it you are, and the ethnographer has to 'pick his [sic] way' through 'piled-up structures of influence and implication'. (*op.cit.*, p7).

Geertz uses the philosopher Gilbert Ryle's notion of 'thick description' to illustrate the interpretive complexities in trying to understand behaviour and the value systems embedded in it. Ryle illustrates the notion by comparing the difference between a twitch and a wink. A 'thin description' might be: 'a rapid contraction of the right eyelid'. But a 'thick description' must not only describe and account for the context in which this twitch/wink occurs but also explain whether it was a wink or not. In other words, did it have symbolic significance? Was it a conspirational sign or a reflex action? Or was it a fake wink because the winker wanted the others to think there was a conspiracy going on. Or was there a conspiracy going on, but the winker did not know there was one, but winked in order to get one going, not realising that their wink would be a sign to the others that this person did not know about the real conspiracy. And so on, and so on (our extension of Geertz's discussion). Of course, as Geertz suggests any school teacher knows, 'getting to the bottom' of any such behaviour is impossible, but the task of the ethnographer is to understand the difference between 'thin' and 'thick' description and to start the business of making their descriptions thicker by learning more and more about the context and 'piled-up' meanings which the participants brought to and made out of the encounter. The final ethnographic text will be the result of looking at the microscopic and producing not facts but interpretations.

The ethnographer, however, is not just an observer making interpretations, he or she is also a participant, learning how to make meanings and in particular, learning how a

group communicates together in a systematic way. The focus on communication within the ethnographic tradition is particularly relevant for language students.

The Ethnography of Communication

Language students are familiar with the notion of 'communicative competence' in the sense of appropriate behaviour in specific contexts but rarely perceive it as embedded in the notion of 'cultural competence'. In other words, the relationship between 'culture' and communication remains at a superficial and unanalytical level. Saville-Troike in her excellent introduction to the ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike 1982) suggests that to be communicatively competent speakers need:

- knowledge of the social structures
- an understanding of the values and attitudes related to language
- a network of conceptual categories resulting from shared experiences
- an understanding of the way knowledge and skills are transmitted.

In many respects, this list is a syllabus for an introductory course on ethnography. Many of the concepts introduced in the proceeding units provide a framework for helping students to make sense of both their own and different social structures. The patterns of communication they abstract from their experiences help them to understand how social categories are ranked, how social relations and networks are formed and maintained, how major changes in social status are symbolically enacted and how communication acts as a form of social control. For example, in Unit 6 on gender relations, female/male language is explored as a marker of social categorisation; in Unit 14 the idea of a speech community based on networks of interaction is introduced; in Units 13, 16 and 17 the idea of ritual as marking social boundaries and changes in social status is illustrated.

Units 13 and 14 on Language & Nation and Language & Identity are concerned with values and attitudes related to language and Units 10 and 11 deal with 'conceptual categories'. The idea of 'culture' as learned behaviour in which knowledge and skills are transmitted is focused on explicitly in Unit 5 on socialisation and education. Finally, the ethnographic method for carrying out an ethnography of communication is described in Unit 8 on participant observation (and see Spradley 1980, Chapter 1). The assignment for this unit is also a first stab at doing some participant observation, although at this stage it is not labelled as such.

The way communication is patterned and organised as a system of communicative events (Saville-Troike 1982) expresses and contributes to the construction of the system of meanings that underpin these events. So there is a relationship between what are loosely called 'cultural themes' – for example how direct or indirect to be within a particular community or in a particular situation – and the communicative norms of the community. For instance, degrees of politeness, not saying 'no' or using a metaphor or proverb to make a point are all manners of indirectness which link to the values and belief systems of that community.

It is however, misleading to suggest that there is any simple one-to-one relationship between a particular communicative style (see Unit 14 for more details) and a community. Social and cultural practices are more dynamic than that relationship suggests. Nor, as we have suggested, is it sufficient to try to understand cultural practices in terms of shared knowledge and values, as if each community were a static, impermeable entity. So, this section will finish with a brief critique of the shared knowledge and values approach.

The Critical View

This fourth and final view of culture critiques the 'shared meanings and values' approach for its lack of historical understanding of the hierarchical nature of society and the way particular sets of meanings gain authority.

Recent critics of the traditional view of 'culture' have been influenced by the earlier critique of Talal Asad (1979). In his critique, he challenges the essentialising notion of a group having a 'culture', the idea that there is some essential set of meanings which define them. First of all, this produces a frozen image of a group and its practices and suggests an unchanging set of values and behaviours. Secondly, it assumes there is a universal set of principles which the ethnographer and the group they study share, so that the 'meanings' the ethnographer describes are assumed to be the same meanings that hold the group together.

Asad also criticises traditional ethnographers for being unconcerned with issues of power. And this theme is currently a major issue within the discipline of anthropology: 'The verification and naturalisation of "culture" hides the kinds of questions about power and social change that are currently at the forefront of anthropological enquiry'. (Street 1993). Street traces through the argument by looking at the classic study by Block on political language (1975) and its critique by Parkin (1984). Block's study of political oratory has much in common with the ethnographer of communication, but he is more explicit about the role of oratory as a means of social control, thus bringing in a more overt 'power' dimension.

Parkin (1984) takes the argument further. He suggests that there is not one dominant set of rhetorical strategies which everyone finds appropriate, but that these dominant styles are contested by others within the group. So, ethnographers should not take these dominant cultural practices, and the terms used to define them, as the givens of a 'culture'. Instead, they should look at the varieties of and struggles over meanings that are observable in the actions of a small group. An example of the contests over meanings is the way in which the discourse of race and ethnicity has changed, and is still changing and how the current language of anti-racism is ignored or denied by many other groups. Another example is the way youth cultures use particular discourses to challenge more traditional practices of older generations.

So, Street argues for a dynamic, active notion of 'culture', suggesting that the word itself turns the daily practices and meaning-making of a group into an abstract and reified concept. Instead, he suggests: 'Culture is a verb' (Street *ibid.*). (For this reason notions of 'cultural knowledge and 'cultural practice' are less problematic than the term 'culture'). But beyond that, the ethnographer needs not just to describe and interpret practices but to ask questions about how those practices come to gain authority (or not).

> An understanding of culture, then, is not simply a knowledge of differences, but rather an understanding of how and why differences in language, thought, use of materials and behaviour have come about. There are certainly cultural differences, just as there are differences in climate or personality or various batches of the same colour of paint – but these differences have meanings, functions and histories in order to understand the differences; they do not use the apparent 'fact' of differences to explain history, politics and beliefs. (Street 1993)

So, ethnographers cannot observe and define a shared practice and fix it as part of a group's 'culture', but instead need to ask: is it shared? How does it come to be shared? And how did this practice come to be dominant or to be used as a means to resist domination? This constant questioning of how meanings came to have authority links to the ethnographers' own reflexive practice of questioning the extent to which their interpretations are the products of themselves as social beings.

Summary

This course has been most influenced by the semiotic approach but there are also underlying comments from the fourth approach and in a more limited way the cognitive view. Although it would be exciting to plunge students into the current debates on social anthropology, in which issues of power are given much more emphasis, for students new to the discipline (who see themselves as language people not anthropologists) it could be confusing and frustrating to be confronted with a critique of more traditional anthropological notions when these are still relatively unfamiliar to them. They need, first, to think through what shared cultural knowledge is required in order to interpret and give meaning to behaviour from an 'insider's' perspective. As they become more familiar with the approach, they may wish to take up a more critical perspective.

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SECTION TWO

1. Outline of a session

1. Introduction: What do we mean by shared cultural knowledge?
2. Brief presentation and group exercise.
3. Assignment Feedback
4. The Question of evidence
5. Description: interpretation: evaluation
6. Summing up.

2. Description of a session

2.1 Introduction

What do we mean by shared cultural knowledge. Remind students of what they are trying to do in using an ethnographic approach (a review of key ideas from Unit 2 and from the background notes to this unit).

Introduce the idea of:

- the resource you need in order to make sense of behaviour;
- what constitutes routine appropriate behaviour and how we interpret behaviour as inappropriate

e.g. in Britain you would give a bunch of flowers with the wrapping on; in Germany the flowers would be presented unwrapped. What makes the two different ways appropriate in the two different countries? Is it always appropriate to do it the 'British' way or the 'German' way? What meanings lie behind this contrastive behaviour? i.e. what resources do you need to have to work out these meanings ?

Remind students that ethnography is about making the routine and taken-for-granted strange, about making the 'invisible', 'visible'.

Explain that there is no attempt to define what we mean by 'culture' since there are so many conflicting interpretations and the term itself suggests that it is a fixed thing which people own rather than something people do. The point can be made by handing out just a few of the attempts at definition. (See Handout 1). If appropriate, some of the different approaches to 'culture' described in the background notes can be introduced here. However, it may be better to keep these more general notions of 'culture' and feed them in at appropriate points throughout the course or when students raise issues about different ways of defining culture. For example, the more cognitive view of culture is drawn on in Units 10 – 12 where 'ethnosemantics' is introduced. Similarly, a critical

view of culture informs some of the discussions of gender and schooling in Units 6 and 7.

Handout 2 is then used to elicit ideas about the kind of cultural practices that are part of everyday life and the cultural knowledge needed to make sense of them, to search for their meaning. Ask students, in groups, to choose one or two of these events and be ready to discuss their semiotic significance with the whole class. Some of the following ideas should be elicited:

(i) Event 1: the sheer amount of knowledge required to come to an interpretation; that some of this knowledge is factual and some evaluative; that there has to be a constant interplay of observing behaviour and drawing inferences. (A methodological point which is brought up again later in the unit)

(ii) Event 2: the need for a ritual formula to manage the boundary between the conversation and the separation; that this remark is formulaic and is not a genuine invitation and needs to be interpreted accordingly by both sides to avoid a misunderstanding; that despite the connotations of familiarity and solidarity in the modal 'must' which is very direct, it is, in fact, using indirectness as a way of avoiding making any future plans to meet. This indirectness is usually associated with lack of familiarity and deference. (This example can be used to illustrate briefly both aspects of semiotic approach generally, and the ethnography of communication in particular).

(iii) Event 3: the need to think about why certain food is not considered edible, i.e. that it has a symbolic significance which makes it in some way repugnant; food and other material and cultural products are categorised as acceptable/ unacceptable, inside or outside etc. (see Unit 16). (This example illustrates further aspects of the semiotic approach.)

(iv) Event 4: the symbolic significance of certain acts that mark boundaries between one stage of our lives and another; the idea that you and your new spouse need a period away alone where you can learn to be a married couple before returning to live out your new status as married people; an extension of 'honeymoon' metaphorically as in 'honeymoon' period in a new job to illustrate the extent to which we live by metaphors (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). This example illustrates an aspect of the cognitive approach and the ways in which we categorise certain practices and give them significance. The symbolic change of status enacted in the honeymoon also draws on the semiotic approach.

(v) Event 5: as in Event 1, the different types of knowledge required to draw appropriate inferences; the tension between 'criminal in the stocks' and symbol of authority which resides in the post of head of school which makes the event humorous; how this humour and the carnival aspect of turning authority on its head is used to encourage the school children to spend their money and so how this event is financially worthwhile for the school; the problem of generalising either to other schools or to fund-raising events more generally; the possibility of

generalising at a conceptual level, i.e. the value placed on conflictual roles as source of entertainment. Aspects of the cognitive and semiotic views are relevant here and again the methodological issues are discussed further below.

This may be a good point to introduce Geertz's notion of a 'thick description' since none of the interpretations can be warranted without this thickness.

2.2 Assignment Feedback

- Put up the OHP guidelines for discussing the assignment (see OHT 1). In remixed groups, ask students to structure their discussion around the guidelines. Ask them to decide what they will report back on and to choose a reporter.
- Elicit group feedback focusing particularly on the following and remind students to draw on Unit 3 on Non-verbal Communciation and Social Space.

  - patterns of interaction, e.g. are these affected by the time of day or the day of the week?, e.g. ordering drinks: was this done by queueing up, catching the eye of the person serving behind the bar etc?

  - cultural knowledge needed to make sense of observations, e.g. the role of civil inattention which allows strangers to manage the event and the extent to which this has to be shared. This is 'insider' knowledge which we are socialised into from our earliest years. (Not the pub culture itself but aspects of public behaviour!).

  - issues arising from the methods used, e.g. note taking, memory, interpretations etc.

These issues will be dealt with more thoroughly in Units 8 and 9.

Link the discussion of how to behave in a pub to the background notes on the ethnography of communication i.e. the ways in which communicative behaviour links to values and attitudes, knowledge of the social structure and conceptual categories, e.g. what is allowable in a pub. One of the earliest studies that can be called ethnography of communication was by Charles Frake in his paper *How to Ask for a Drink in Subanun* (1964). He describes the shared cultural knowledge required to perform this act and, in doing so, describes some of the cultural practices of this group. Many ethnographies of a group start with an ethnography of communication. For example, Sophie's ethnography of *The Camavaliers* started with an interest in how the carnival was performed. Some ethnographic projects are ethnographies of communication: for example, the study of the Sevillanos dance. So the observation of a pub is part of a long tradition of focusing on a particular practice as a way into a cultural group.

2.3 The question of evidence

Use the reading 'Money on the Table' to raise issues of evidence and interpretation. What do you need to do before coming to an interpretation? It is important to have as

'thick' a description as possible and then weigh up all the evidence as either confirming or disconfirming an interpretation.

Make the point that even if your final interpretation of the 'Money on the Table' incident is that the woman was stealing, this interpretation is based on a construct from your own common sense:

'"What actually happens', however, is at least in some measure the observer's construct or model, usually based on the unanalysed concepts of common sense, that is, of the observer's common sense." (Beattie 1964, 38). It is perfectly possible to think of someone from a different community who would not categorise the woman's behaviour as stealing but as exploiting an opportunity. After all, in Britain the categories of 'tax evasion' and 'tax avoidance' could be construed by another society as part of the same category of 'criminally not paying tax'.

Social theorists used to think of social facts as <u>things</u>, but have moved to the theory of social facts as <u>constructions</u>, i.e.

> That facts exist only within a frame of reference, that there is no such thing as 'pure experience', no such thing as 'facts' that are recorded directly 'from nature'. Theoretical presuppositions are always involved and, in consequence, 'a fact' is always the product of some interpretation.
>
> (Ellen 1990, 27)

'Money on the Table' can also be used to raise some of the other issues discussed recently by anthropologists within the 'critical view' of culture, who have critiqued the traditional notions of 'culture', in particular, the issue of power. This entails going beyond the practice of sifting through evidence or even being reflexive about the interpretations arrived at. It entails asking deeper questions about how we come to share the evaluative conclusion that the woman was stealing. Who decides what 'stealing' is? Is it as reprehensible to not give a tip at all as to take the money left as a tip? And why does such a thing as tipping exist at all? Who are the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor? How do the dominant values of a society come to be constructed as normal? And so on.

The point to make here is that not only are interpretations culturally constructed but they are fitted into a hierarchy of values which is decided and perpetuated by the dominant group and either accepted as norms or resisted by the dominated groups. So Geertz's 'thick description' must be re-worked within a political framework.

2.4 Description: Interpretation: Evaluation

Remind students about what is describable in their observations (some of this is a review of Unit 3):

Sensory experience:
seeing
listening
smelling

These experiences need to be recorded in as detailed a way as possible. But however detailed the recording, it cannot be comprehensive. And no description or even transcription of an audio recording is 'pure description'. It always does more than just describe. Theories and models are involved in even the simplest descriptions. For example, if you tape-recorded a pub chat and wanted to transcribe it, you would have to decide what to include and what to exclude (for example laughter, pauses, showing interruptions etc) and how to write it out on the page (for example, would you write it out with each speaker's turn as a piece of continuous prose or would you start a new line each time they paused?). Although these look like simple practical decisions, they actually depend on your theory of interaction.

But for the purposes of raising awareness of the difficulty of even attempting 'pure' description, it is useful for students to make distinctions between description, interpretation and evaluation. (See Handout 3).

If there is time in the session, or later, at home, students can try taking a section of their field notes for the 'Hanging around' assignment and use the chart in Handout 3 to categorise their notes under the three headings.

2.5 Summing up:

- Cultural knowledge is a resource upon which we draw to make sense of our own and other behaviour. We tend to think of it as common sense. It is only when we perceive something unusual occurring that we pause to actively interpret it.
- At any one time, there is a large measure of shared cultural knowledge which helps us to feel part of a group. But we cannot assume that everyone shares this knowledge and we have to ask also how this particular set of presuppositions came to be accepted as the norm.
- Appropriate communicative behaviour, i.e. communicative competence, is part of cultural competence, that is, the mix of behaviours and value systems that generate practices and give them meaning within a political context which only sanctions some of them. Doing an ethnography of communication can be the first step in understanding this cultural competence.
- The capacity to make meanings and for these meanings to be enmeshed in webs of other meanings is what makes everyday living not simply functional but symbolic, whether it is winking and not just twitching or whether it is a ritual to mark a boundary.
- Cultural knowledge is learnt from birth (we are born ethnographers) and changes as our direct experiences and representations of the world around us change.

SECTION THREE

The process of learning cultural knowledge and of learning to take account of those around us is the process of socialisation introduced in Unit 5.

3. Advice and comments

This is quite a difficult session for students. They express feelings about being confused or lost. One of the main difficulties is to encourage them to be analytical about their observations and not merely anecdotal. They find the new discourse which 'patrols' ethnography difficult to use comfortably.

If students do not have some background already in cultural studies, it may be better to avoid the issue of definitions all together. Those who do have a background may want to engage in how the anthropological/sociolinguistic view of 'culture' is somewhat different from the notions of 'culture' they have encountered before.

It is sometimes easier to begin with misunderstandings and the unexpected as a way into their taken-for-granted cultural knowledge. And this approach can be used throughout the rest of the course to anticipate recurring concepts and methodological issues.

If the student group is heterogeneous, then this session gives plenty of opportunities for comparing meanings interculturally.

Student comments

> What have I learnt? To try to think outside my own limitations of experience and set ideas.
>
> I am getting into the habit of analysing each situation but I still haven't got a clue about the purpose of these analyses. ...The same question appears in my mind 'What for?' ...to sum up I have to say that I've really found this module very interesting so far and I hope it will go on like this.
>
> I find myself in a rut of not being able to accept the English ways. I find them very stifling and dishonest. So this (the group discussions) is a great help for me to be able to observe and learn from different nationalities and cultures.

1. ASSIGNMENT

Hanging Around A Local Bar

The PURPOSE of this assignment is to get more practice in making observations and taking notes in a setting with relatively easy access but which is complex enough to have different things going at the same time.

You will begin to learn

- to analyse the raw material your observations provide in terms of culture and social organisation.
- to collect and use adequate evidence for the inferences, hunches and assertions you make from your observations.

Location

You should go to a place

- where you can observe unobtrusively and where you will not feel odd or awkward.
- where you can observe different types of patron groups, interactions between patrons and employees, division of labour among employees.
- Ideally we would like everyone to go to a **local pub**, but if you do not feel comfortable with that you could alternatively go to a coffee bar, tea room etc.

Procedure

1. Go to your chosen location. Spend about **half an hour to an hour** there, depending on how much is happening. You could stop when nothing new appears to be going on.
2. See what you can see, hear and learn by just hanging around as a patron. **Do not formally interview anyone.** In your notes, however, try to indicate questions that occur to you which you feel cannot be answered without interviewing people. What limitations did this cause?
3. If you can take notes unobtrusively while you are there, fine. If you think it is too difficult to do so, **write down everything you can remember as soon as possible.** That means within a couple of hours: if you leave it much later, or even until the next day, you will inevitably find that you have forgotten large chunks. The loo is said to be a popular refuge amongst anthropologists. It is essential that you note the time, date, etc. of your visit.

4. Look through your notes a few times. Make a note of any **further thoughts** you may have on your material.

5. Draw **a quick map** of your chosen location, clearly labelling the major objects and areas of activity.

What to look for:

1. Social organization, including
2. the different categories of patron who frequent the place while you are there
3. the division of labour among employees
4. any patterns in the interactions between patrons, between patrons and employees, between employees.

Other things to think about:

1. Identifying typical routines of activity (i.e. recurring sequences of behaviour)
2. Anything which strikes you as unusual: how do you make sense of it?
3. Do you see any inappropriate/unacceptable behaviour? How do other participants deal with it?

(With acknowledgement to D. Campbell of Michigan State University)

OHT 1 – ASSIGNMENT: Hanging around a local bar

Guidelines for Discussion

Compare notes – What was written down/what not

Groups to look at/report back on one specific aspect/issue.

1.1 Characteristics for differentiating between different groups

1.2 Patterns of interaction e.g.
gender relations
joining a group
ordering a drink

1.3 Typical routines e.g.
method of entering/leaving
people at the bar

2. What was particularly interesting?

3.1 Did anything odd happen? What made it unusual?

3.2 Was there any inappropriate/unacceptable behaviour? Any taboos involved?

What previous knowledge (i.e. interpretive resource) do you need in order to make sense of what you observed?

What is the evidence for your conclusions?

What constituted a pattern? How was it identified?

How did your hunches change during the visit?

How did your thinking about what you saw evolve?

What are your thoughts about the methods you used?

HANDOUT 1

On not defining culture.

Some past definitions of 'Culture' contested by more recent views

> refers to the whole range of **human activities which are learned** and not instinctive, and which are transmitted from generation to generation through various learning processes.
> (Beattie 1964, 20)

> that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits **acquired by man as a member of society**.
> (Sir Edward Tyler 1871 in Beattie 1964, 20)

> a system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting (Goodenough 1971: 41)

> Clyde Kluckholn in **Mirror for Man** (quoted by Geertz 1973: 4)
>
> 1. the **total way of life of a people**
> 2. the social legacy the individual acquires from his group
> 3. a **way of thinking, feeling, and believing**
> 4. an abstraction from behaviour
> 5. the anthropologist's theory about the way in which a group of people in fact behave
> 6. a storehouse of pooled learning
> 7. a set of **standardised orientations to recurrent problems**
> 8. **learned behaviour**
> 9. a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour
> 10. **a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other me**
> 11. a precipitate of history (+ similes as map, sieve, matrix).

HANDOUT 2

Discuss one or two of the following events.

1. In 'Money on the Table' what do you need to know to come to an interpretation that this woman was stealing the money? (ref. Singer, E. Money on the Table). If you have not read this article yet, you could consider what knowledge is required to leave a tip at a restaurant.
2. You bump into someone you know in the street but have not seen for months. What inferences do you draw from her leave-taking remark 'You must come and see us sometime'?
3. You are invited to a recently opened Chinese restaurant where all the dishes are made of snake. What is your reaction? If you are less than ecstatic at the prospect, how do you account for your reactions?
4. How would you explain what a 'honeymoon' is to someone newly arrived in Britain from a country where marriage practices are very different?
5. You take along a friend from France to your little brother's school fête. She sees a woman standing with her head in a cardboard frame while schoolchildren and adults throw wet sponges at her face. On enquiring, she finds out that the woman is the school's headmistress. How do you explain this behaviour? How far can you generalise about this behaviour?

HANDOUT 3

What are the different levels of observation?

1. **Observable 'fact'**
   e.g. A sponge was thrown at a woman in the 'stocks' of the school playground
2. **Interpretation**

   e.g. She was acting out the part of a medieval criminal and the children paid to subvert traditional authority in order for the school to make money for the school fund or some good cause.
3. **Evaluation**
   e.g. Teachers are prepared to make themselves look ridiculous in order to generate funds for the school

   e.g. (or alternatively) no person in authority should make a public exhibition of themselves and undermine their position.

The points to emphasise here are: a 'thick description' includes detailed description and interpretation but the student ethnographer must be aware of the distinction between them (as far as it is possible to make such a distinction) and not slide from description to interpretation unthinkingly. (For example, if a child is observed shouting at another child, it cannot be assumed that the latter is being bullied.) Secondly, the ethnographer is not there to evaluate from their perspective but to make sense of the evaluations offered by informants.

A sample format for recording different levels of observation in the classroom:

Description	**Interpretation**

Evaluation

UNIT FOUR – Shared Cultural Knowledge

READING

- **Student ethnography: Singer, E *Money on the Table***

Money on the Table: an Ethnographic Whatisit,
Elliot A. Singer (Michigan State University)

During a discussion of the assignment to visit a public gathering place, such as a bar, for directed experience in participant observation, one student noticed an incident which he found of particular interest. A further examination of this incident may throw considerable light both on the notion of culture as rules and meanings and on the problem of evidence for making ethnographic inferences and interpretations.

What was seen can be described as follows. Three people, one male and two females, were seated at a table in the restaurant. When the three of them got up together, the man left some coins on the table. Then the man and one of the women exited from the building while the other woman walked in the opposite direction to the bathroom. After a brief stay in the bathroom the second woman returned to the table, looked around her, picked up the coins that had been left there, and exited from the building through the same door as the others.

The observer, and other members of the class to whom he related this incident, immediately made an ethnographic interpretation that the second woman's behaviour was as an example a cultural category of misbehaviours known as stealing. The questions we must ask are: what is it necessary to know in order to make this ethnographic interpretation? And what is the evidence that this, rather than an alternative interpretation, is valid?

Let us first try to make explicit some of the shared cultural knowledge that makes this incident both interesting and interpretable in the first place:

1. There are objects named coins which in this culture are a form of money, something that can be exchanged for goods or services. In other cultures money may take the form of conch shells, or there may be no form of money at all.
2. In this culture there exist certain places where food or drinks are served which are known as bars and restaurants. Unlike in homes, including in which one is a guest, in bars or restaurants it is necessary to pay, that is to give money in exchange for food or drinks. In this particular restaurant money is paid immediately upon

receiving food or drink, while in other bars and restaurants the money may be collected just before the patrons leave.

3. In bars and restaurants, unlike in homes (except those with servants), there is a distinction between employees; of whom there may be several sub-types, and patrons. It is the employees formal obligation to serve food and drink to the patrons, and it is the patrons formal obligation to pay for the food and drink.

4. When the amount of money given by a patron to an employee exceeds the cost of the food or drink, the employee returns change to the patron. This change often includes coins.

5. When several persons are served at a restaurant as a single unit, there are several ways of paying the bill. One common way is for one person to represent the patron unit in paying the bill to an employee, and for other individuals in the unit to give money amounting to their share of the bill to the person representing the group rather than directly to the employee. (This may be complicated if there are certain sub-groups within the patron unit, such as a couple, which act as single economic entities.) In these cases the representative of the patron group may make change for the other members of the group.

6. There is also an informal obligation for a patron to leave money on the table or counter as a tip for the serving person. This money is given in payment for individual services, and is in addition to payment for the goods. This distinction between the payments can be seen in that the normal payment precedes the tip, and is given directly to an employee while the tip is usually given indirectly (e.g. by leaving it on the table). This indirection suggests the informality of the tipping obligation, as do the observations that it does not always occur, that the amount left may vary considerably, and that there is no formal sanction (e.g. arrest) if one fails to leave a tip (although there may be an informal sanction of rude or poor service at a later date). Furthermore, there are some bars and restaurants, including the one where the incident took place, where tipping is more optional than in others, because there is little direct service.

7. Once a tip has been left it is considered to belong to the employees. (There are additional rules as to which employees have rights to pick up the tip, and how the tip money is divided which need not concern us here). Only employees and not patrons have the formal right to take the tip from where it has been left. The only exception is the patron who has left the tip, or someone acting as the representative of that patron (e.g. the other member of a couple).

8. People who take money belonging to others engage in stealing.

As can be seen it is necessary to know a great deal about culture in the United States in general, and about the culture of bars and restaurants in particular in order to find this incident strange. One must know about such cultural categories as money, eating out, paying, patrons, employees, change, tipping, and stealing, plus the formal and informal rules or norms that govern the relationship between patrons and employees, especially in terms of such routines as payment, making change, and tipping. While most of us take these categories and rules for granted because we are so used to them, as those of you who have ever tried to get served, pay a bill, or leave a tip in another country not used to tourists from the United States can attest, not everybody shares them.

Given a knowledge of these categories and rules, which one learns through recurrent observation as well as direct instruction, this incident becomes interesting because it does not fit with our normal expectations of routine behaviour in a bar or a restaurant. All behaviours we see are made meaningful by fitting them into identifiable and often named categories and routines. When, in a bar, we see someone leave coins on a table and an employee pick up the coins, we identify this as tipping, a perfectly standard routine. Indeed, we probably hardly notice such behaviour because it is so commonplace. It is when we observe something which fails to be identifiable within a routine, that special attention is called to it. And in calling attention to itself, an unusual occurrence often makes us reflect upon the routine rules and categories that we usually take for granted.

This incident called attention to itself because it failed to fit perfectly into identifiable routines in a bar or restaurant setting. There are two routines involving coins : change making and tipping. (We may ignore such routines as flipping coins). This incident made sense neither as the routine making change, because the money was left on the table and was only picked up by the woman after her companions had exited from the scene, nor as the routine tipping, because the money left on the table, was taken by a patron not by an employee. Therefore, in order to make sense of what happened, the observer and other members of the class fit this incident into another routine, one which is considered inappropriate but not incomprehensible, known as stealing. To call this incident stealing is to make an ethnographic interpretation as to its meaning.

This raises the question of evidence. What is the basis on which this incident may be given the interpretation stealing? Are there alternative interpretations that could also make sense of the incident without recourse to an abnormal form of behaviour?

One possible interpretation is that the coins were change that had been given to the woman who picked them up by her companions. While this may seem unlikely given that she waited before taking the money until after they had left, there may be an explanation for this wait. She may simply have forgotten it, or been in a hurry to get to the bathroom. Observations of the woman being drunk or exhibiting bladder discomfort would be evidence for this interpretation. Better still would have been a conversation directly indicating that this was the woman's change (e.g. "Don't forget your change!"). Without such supporting observations, however, this interpretation is purely conjectural.

A second interpretation would be that the coins were a tip, but that the woman picked up the money to return it to her companions because she deemed leaving the tip inappropriate. She might have waited either because she only decided against tipping while going to the bathroom, or because she disagreed with her companions about tipping. One piece of confirming evidence is that at this particular restaurant people usually go up to the counter to obtain food and drinks so tipping is infrequent. Further confirming evidence would have been a conversation in which the woman had urged her companions not to leave a tip; one might then infer that, even though they had left one, she felt so strongly about this that she had taken the money to return to them later. This would fit with her waiting before picking up the money. Again, however, there is no real evidence for this interpretation.

Both of these interpretations manage, with a little creative thinking, to fit the incident into acceptable bar routines. The other interpretation requires viewing the incident as a socially unacceptable routine, stealing. What is the confirming evidence? The waiting to take the coins from the table until after the companions had left is one piece of evidence. The inference, here, is that she did not want them to see her. However, the other interpretations also offer explanations for this wait. It is the presence of additional information that makes this interpretation most plausible. According to the observer, the woman spent too little time in the bathroom to use the toilet, wash up, or put on make-up. The inference, here, is that she must have gone into the bathroom as an excuse for not leaving with her companions. Furthermore, before picking up the money, the woman was observed looking around. The inference, here, is that she was trying to make sure that she was not seen. There might have been other confirming evidence not noted, such as a surreptitious manner of putting away the money, or looking over her shoulder while exiting. However, even without this additional evidence, this interpretation fits the whole pattern of behaviour better than the others.

Is it stealing if employee still wouldn't taken tip?

What does this tell us about evidence and interpretation in ethnography? First, interpretation requires a knowledge of what is commonplace. As long as all the details of a particular incident fit into commonplace categories and routines it goes unnoticed. The social construction of these commonplace categories and routines develops from observing and experiencing enormous numbers of unnoticed or invisible incidents. One of the principle tasks of ethnography is to abstract from these incidents the categories and rules for routines, and to make them explicit. Second, when the incident fails to fit well into a commonplace routine, it becomes necessary to actively interpret it. Usually we do this with little effort. We either fit it into some less commonplace routine such as stealing, or we come up with ways of explaining away bits of the puzzle that don't fit. In everyday life it rarely matters which interpretation has the most evidence; we simply must satisfy ourselves that what happened makes sense, and in doing so we often repress disconfirming evidence. In doing ethnography, however, it becomes necessary to systematically list all of the details in the incident, and to weigh them as confirming or disconfirming evidence for our interpretation, and for alternative interpretations. It is rare that any interpretation of an unusual occurrence will work perfectly, but by providing all of the details, and by considering alternatives, it usually becomes possible to convince others, as well as ourselves, of the validity of a particular interpretation.

This was a rather small bit of a behaviour, but in recognizing it as interesting, and in unravelling of all the threads of culture needed to interpret it, it becomes sensible. This is what doing ethnography is all about.